

Valerie Montgomery Rice, MD
“What Shall Be Your Unique Contribution?”
UMass Medical School Commencement Keynote Address
June 4, 2017

It is a pleasure and an honor for me to be with all of you today. I want to thank Chancellor Collins for his leadership of this fine institution and for our budding friendship.

I also want to congratulate my fellow honorees today, Víctor Grífol and Dr. Patricia Donahoe. Thank you for your many contributions to health care; it is an honor to stand alongside each of you and be recognized today.

I also must recognize the faculty, administrators, and staff who have poured into these graduates and shared with them both the marvels of medicine and the responsibilities of serving our communities.

To the family and friends, this day is as much yours as the graduates. You too have sacrificed much in support of their dreams, so congratulations.

And finally, to the brilliant, promising graduates of the Class of 2017. The moment has finally come. Today you will walk across this platform, receive your diplomas and hood, and join those of us who are privileged to practice medicine and continue the art of discovery and caring.

I choose the word privileged because it is truly a privilege to serve others through the healing arts, and the quest for knowledge through discovery. You will bear witness to the most intimate moments in a person's life: the birth of a child or for some the hard journey to conception; the transitioning of a loved one; the crowning of the first tooth; the discovery of a tumor; the negative test results; the first steps after a tragic event. Each of these moments will alter you in ways you cannot imagine.

You are the ones who, through your art of discovery, will make precision medicine real. What was once only hypothesized in the test tube or through the cell line, now connects the dots and leads to the lifesaving drug that not only extends but enhances the quality of life.

You, through your personal touch, will hold the hand of the patient or listen intently to their fears as you prepare them for their next step in care.

They (some whose names you may forget but whose stories you will always remember) will become a part of you, sometimes challenging you and other times invigorating you to new heights; but always reminding you why you answered the call to become a health care and biomedical science professional.

For some of you it was a dream birthed in your childhood and nourished throughout the years with hard work, dedication and sacrifice.

For others you experienced a life altering moment, that may or may not have been positive, and you knew you could make a difference in this space.

Or perhaps you entered another profession, and with some time realized your true passion was in service to others or the pursuit of discovery.

Whatever the path you took to reach this moment, each of you felt something stir deep within – a calling if you will, and you chose to answer that call.

You spent the past several years in study and in service as you traversed the path to becoming this professional of health and science. It takes imagination, conviction, and grit to remain steadfast in pursuit of a dream.

Class of 2017, you have arrived! Now what? Not so long ago, well that's actually not true, for this week I celebrated my 30th reunion from medical school, I sat where you sit today, a graduate of an amazing medical school, excited to begin my residency program and life as a doctor.

What I could not possibly have conceived then were the many ways in which I could contribute to the world of medicine, which I actually think of as the world of "health, science and equity."

I knew I wanted to continue my research in infertility and reproductive endocrinology. I knew I wanted to make a difference in the lives of my patients. And, I knew I wanted to be a well-respected physician-scientist, not through accolades or notoriety, but because of the impact I hoped to make and the lives I hoped to touch.

But Class of 2017, may I be honest for a moment? At the root, these were actually shallow desires and hopes. Although my intentions were honorable and pure, early on I began to realize that they weren't going to contribute to health care in a way that would address the challenges plaguing individuals, families and communities throughout our country and globe.

Yes, I made a difference in the life of that person or couple as I worked with my team to advance the science of hormone therapy in the treatment of anovulation, or performed what we thought were "miracle surgeries," removing 36 fibroids from a uterus and watching the birth of a child two years later. Yes, they were and are important to that individual, but is it enough?

Is it enough to make a difference in the life of one individual?

You are graduating into this profession at a truly unique time in our nation's history. We are grappling with our fundamental values as Americans, while navigating a strong political divide on how to advance health care to the millions of people living in this country.

We are at a critical juncture, one that presents both opportunities and challenges for health reform. It will determine whether we move toward a more equitable, accessible, patient-centered health system or whether we reverse course back to a system of increasing and unconscionable health disparities.

As health care providers and scientists, if we do not pay close attention to the health care policy debates and advocate for policies that will positively benefit our patients, the remarkable gains we have fought so hard to attain over a century-and-a-half, could be wiped out, moving us backwards in terms of health care coverage, access, delivery and equity.

The American Health Care Act (AHCA) unfortunately will not move us in the right direction towards equity. This act, to name a few:

- Rescinds the Prevention and Public Health Fund;
- Bars funding for Planned Parenthood for 1 year; and
- Faces Medicaid with \$834 billion in cuts.

When one assesses the act by the numbers, we see:

- 23 million more people are estimated to be without insurance by 2026, making a total of 51 million people under the age of 65 years old without insurance by 2026, compared to an estimated 28 million under the ACA;
- Average premium price would increase by about 20 percent in 2018;
- The National Institutes of Health (NIH) budget will be slashed by 22%, decreasing it from \$34.6 billion to \$26.9 billion.
- And yes, the deficit would be reduced by about \$119 billion by 2026, because AHCA is in effect a \$662 billion tax cut.

Remember that, as expressed by Hubert Humphrey, 38th vice president of the United States under President Lyndon B. Johnson, “the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped.”

Beyond the legislation and policy, we will still remain challenged by a looming physician shortage as our population continues to grow and people are living longer.

It is into this unique mix of challenge and opportunity that you are called.

So “how you will you contribute and what will be unique about your contribution?”

I’m glad to say I learned a lot during my time as a practicing physician. I had the opportunity to engage people from all walks of life and to see into the “heart of humanity.”

My sight was made clear; because along the way I discovered I needed to ask one simple question during each and every patient encounter: “Based on who is sitting in front of me, what's possible?”

Now, how did this question help me to see the “heart of humanity and to understand that every individual counts?”

People speak about the social determinants of health, and many of us recognize that we cannot “access our way out of disparities to equity.” Unfortunately, too many of our communities lack proper access to healthy food options and safe places to work, live and play. These and a host of other factors add to the inequities we see in health care.

Yes, giving everyone access to health care is the right, moral and just start. But, it's not the end.

We all know that if you give everyone access through insurance and do not consider the other factors that impact their health, like poverty, education, transportation, racism, sexism, any “ism,” (the social factors that impact health) then they will never reach their optimal level of health.

Take for example this great state where you have been fortunate to train and grow as health care and scientific professionals. Massachusetts is a great example of making hard, just decisions about access.

The average uninsured rate in Massachusetts is 3.4 percent, however it consists primarily of people below the poverty line and with households with incomes less than \$75,000. So even though this state took the first step by ensuring access, what we continue to see even in this state are the manifestations of social determinants of health.

Consider, if you will, that after health care reform in this state, based on multiple reports, we still have not seen:

- A significant change in hospital admission rates as compared with states that did not undergo health care reform;
- A significant decline in admission rates for ambulatory-care-sensitive conditions, or ACSCs, in counties in Massachusetts with the highest baseline uninsured rates (and largest gains in insurance after reform) compared with those with the lowest baseline uninsured rates (and smallest gains after reform); and, lastly,
- We failed to find evidence of a significant narrowing of pre-existing racial and ethnic disparities.

This tells us of the power of other factors, such as employment or education, in impacting health. So, we must do more than provide access to begin to improve the health of this nation and move us towards health equity.

You must remember, when the patient is seeing you as the provider, they have overcome the first barrier, access. It is a part of your responsibility to ensure that engagement includes more than health delivery, it must include “care delivery.”

Now the biomedical scientist may be sitting in the audience and asking, “Is she speaking to me? Do I have a role?”

I am reminded of a reading about Dr. Kary Banks Mullis, who received a Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1993 for his invention of the polymerase chain reaction (PCR). The process, which Kary Mullis conceptualized in 1983, is hailed as one of the monumental scientific techniques of the twentieth century. He was quoted as saying, “My mother often mailed me articles from *Reader's Digest* about advances in DNA chemistry. No matter how I tried to explain it to her, she never grasped the concept that I could have been writing those articles, that something I had invented made most of those DNA discoveries possible.”

Graduates, sometimes your work is so profound, that you are the only one who recognizes that it is so profound. It takes time for others to catch on. We are depending on you and your resolve to continue the path of illumination of hope for diseases that plague us now and for the prevention of those that will not stand a chance because of you.

The discoveries you make, the innovative solutions made possible through your work will make the difference in what's possible for each and every person living in this world.

And your colleague charged with delivering the care will serve as your connection to the patient when the question is asked, “Based on who is sitting in front of me what's possible?” Your discovery will add to the possibilities for that patient.

Remember the question and think on what it forces you to do.

“Based on who is sitting in front of me, what's possible”?

Think of the times that you went to someone for advice or care and they just focused on you, they had to put themselves and their thoughts on you and not them, they had to ask questions just about you, your family, your living environment, your financial circumstances and, dependent upon the need or question you asked or guidance you were seeking, they may have even gotten more personal and asked about your safety or your mental state.

"Based on who is in front of me, what's possible"? When you assist a person based on the uniqueness of their circumstances you are already contributing.

As a health care provider, scientist, public health professional, our individual oaths requires that we do so.

We don't get to choose who we care for; we shouldn't be faced with the moral dilemma of whose life matters and whose does not. Our discoveries shouldn't be based on how much we can sell the drug for and our desire to ensure that preventive care measures are disseminated to all, shouldn't be determined by someone else's definition of "all."

All actually means *all*.

You see graduates, for everyone who you asked that simple question, "Based on who's sitting in front me, what's possible?" you are assisting them with the possibility of experiencing health equity – giving them what they need, when they need it, in the amount they need to reach their optimal level of health.

Your experiences will allow you to see what lights you up.

It was through experiences that I found what lights me up and my unique contribution to this health care landscape.

I found mine in educating and training the future generation of health care professionals. I realized the greatest contribution I could make to improving the lives and well-being of individuals and communities, was to ensure that we recruited, educated, and trained people who would be dedicated to meeting the challenges in health care head on, innovating against them, and working within the community to advance health equity.

I knew that it would take players from all walks of life to play in this arena called health care. Each of us, from the patient to the doctor, the researcher, the nurse, the hospital clerk, the lab technician and the principal investigator contribute daily to both the challenges and solutions that shape health care in this country.

Graduates, I'm challenging you today to be more than a player and to identify your unique contribution.

I know each of you have been uniquely prepared to do so. UMass, like Morehouse School of Medicine, is dedicated to advancing primary care, to serving the underserved and to partnering with the community to improve health opportunities and outcomes.

With that as your mission and values, you are destined to make significant contributions. You need only to dig deep and ask yourself daily what you can do to make a difference. As medical students, nursing students and researchers you understand that it starts with a question.

Every day I ask myself what I can do today to diversify the physician and scientific workforce, what can I do to strengthen the pipeline from elementary school to medical school, what can I do to advance health equity.

Diversity is important because we each bring unique experiences, perspectives, and solutions to the table. It's important that you tell your story and be your story. Don't shy away from your experiences, your challenges, your joys, and the many wonderfully complicated things that shape who you are. We are all complicated and beautiful works of art. Our stories are meant to be shared.

I never thought my little story would mean anything to anyone other than me. During my inauguration my marketing and communications team worked with the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, the major newspaper in Atlanta, to do a profile of me.

That story was done almost three years ago now and, to this day, women of all ages still write me or send me Facebook messages, sharing how much my story, *my story*, inspired them. I can't say I am completely comfortable sharing my story, mostly because I am still amazed that people are even interested, but what I have come to realize and understand is the need for stories such as mine – a girl from a small, rural working-class home, a first-time college graduate who goes on to study at Georgia Tech, Harvard Medical School, Emory University School of Medicine and rises to the position of president and dean of a medical school.

You too have a story and it's a good one. Embrace it. Tell it.

In each of our stories are some dark moments. Those too shaped who you are. They gave you the resilience and grit needed to be successful in medical school. Build upon that resilience and remember that grit coupled with motivation is unstoppable.

The road from here might not be smooth. Wherever your paths lead from here, you will be challenged. But you have all you need within you to face those challenges.

Even at this level in my career, I have to hold steadfast to the pursuit of my dream, health equity, and rely on resilience, motivation, and grit to navigate the challenges and see the opportunities ahead.

As you become alumni of this great medical school, you join an inspirational body of health care professionals. But remember, UMass chose you – you! – and all it means to be you.

So I leave you with one last charge. Find joy and feel it. Allow it to wash over you.

One of my favorite books is *The Alchemist*, written by a Brazilian author named Paulo Coelho. It tells of a shepherd boy named Santiago who travels from his homeland in Spain to the Egyptian desert in search of a treasure built in the pyramids. He meets many along the way on his quest. I want to share with you a profound parable that is shared in the book. This parable is that of the Secret of Happiness.

A young hero seeks out a wise man to explain to him the secret of happiness. The wise man explains that he does not have time to explain the secret of happiness and suggests instead that the young hero look around the palace and return in two hours. But before the young hero leaves, the wise man asks the young man to do something: "As you wander around, carry this spoon with you without allowing the oil to spill."

The young hero descends the stairways of the palace all the while being careful not to spill any of the oil. He returns to the wise man and the wise man asks the young hero, "Did you see the Persian tapestries that are hanging in my dining hall? Did you see the garden that it took the master gardener ten years to create? Did you notice the beautiful parchments in the library?"

The boy was embarrassed, and confessed that he had observed nothing. His only concern had been not to spill the oil that the wise man had entrusted to him. "Then go back and observe the marvels of my world," said the wise man. "You cannot trust a man if you do not know his house."

Relieved, the boy picked up the spoon and returned to his exploration of the palace, this time observing all of the works of art on the ceilings and the walls. He saw the gardens, the mountains all around him, the beauty of the flowers, and the taste with which everything had been selected.

Upon returning to the wise man, he related in detail everything he had seen. "But where are the drops of oil I entrusted to you?" asked the wise man. Looking down at the spoon he held, the boy saw that the oil was gone. "Well, there is only one piece of advice I can give you," said the wisest of wise men. "The secret of happiness is to see all the marvels of the world, and never forget the drops of oil on the spoon."

So imagine, my soon-to-be colleagues, that as you engage each person in front of you and think, "Based on who is sitting in front of me, what's possible?" and you look at them with no limitations, and you are amazed as they share their story by the resilience it has taken for them to overcome the challenges they endure daily. And as you hear the details of their life, you begin to understand how to extend your medical knowledge to assist them in realizing their optimal level of health and, yes indeed, health equity, as you partner with them to develop a solution unique for their circumstances.

Your graduation today is indicative of the fact that you are determined, intelligent and skilled individuals with big dreams and aspirations.

I assure you that along your journey much will be entrusted to you – the well-being of others; the strength and vitality of your community; the hope for a better tomorrow; the future of the generations to come after you. Personally you have been entrusted with the care for and love of your spouse, children and others that are cherished as loved ones. Remember to "see all the marvels of the world, and never forget the drops of oil on the spoon."

Thank you for allowing me to share my "drops of oil" and, to the Class of 2017, job well done. As I look at each of you and ask, "Based on whose sitting in front me, what's possible/" the resounding answer is health equity. Be the health care and biomedical professionals the nation needs.

Congratulations and thank you.