

Special Article to the Graduating Class of 1993, John A Burns School of Medicine

Anita L Gerhard MD*

Thank you to the [1993 graduating class of the John A Burns School of Medicine] for the opportunity to address you on this important occasion; it is a great honor and a privilege for me to do so.

This is a very special class for many reasons. You are the first Problem-Based Learning (PBL) class to graduate from this school, and you are graduating at a time when we are all nervously waiting for the announcement of the Clinton health care reforms.

You are also special to me in a more personal way. I first came to Hawaii 4 years ago, and although I have taught students at other schools, we started our career at the University of Hawaii John A Burns School of Medicine at the same time. We have been through a lot together, particularly during our third year. You have given me a lot: Your curiosity, enthusiasm, thoughtful questions—as well as numerous mangoes, grapefruits, oranges, and even fresh fish that you have caught. The close working relationship between teacher and student is one of the most rewarding aspects of being a faculty member here.

So, on this occasion I would like to offer you a gift in return. I wasn't sure what form that gift would take until 2 weeks ago when one of you came into my office bringing strawberries to share. This reminded me of a story that has sustained me in many ways over the years. This story is my graduation present to you. It is from a collection of Zen writings and is called:

A Buddha Parable in a Sutra

A man traveling across a field
encountered a tiger.
He fled, the tiger after him.
Coming to a precipice, he caught hold
of the root of a wild vine and
swung himself down over the edge.
The tiger sniffed at him from above.
Trembling, the man looked down
to where, far below,
another tiger was waiting to eat him.
Only the vine sustained the man.
Two mice, one black and one white,

little by little were gnawing away at the vine.
The man saw a luscious strawberry
within reach.
Grasping the vine with one hand,
he plucked the strawberry with the other.
How sweet it tasted!

Now this story might seem like a rather bizarre gift, so let me explain what it means in the context of a gift to each of you.

What are the tigers above and below you? What do the vine and the strawberry signify?

In terms of your immediate situation, you have just escaped the challenges of medical school [behind you now] and might feel that you are trembling, like the man in the story, at the fearsome prospect of internship and residency ahead [below].

My message to you is this: Don't let the fact that there are challenges to come distract you from the supreme importance of this occasion. Savor this moment, this celebration of your hard-won accomplishment. The maile leis that you have just received from your families and loved ones remind me of the fabled vine, your lifeline. What we have just witnessed, which brought tears to my eyes, is a commemoration of their love and sacrifice, as well as their pride in your achievement. This is an image that I urge you to permanently engrave in your memory. It is the sweet strawberry that will give you faith, hope and sustenance during the long hours that await you in the years to come.

However, the other [far below] tigers that I want to talk to you about today are the challenges that our entire society will be facing. Like the man in our story, we are on a precipice, on the edge of changes in our health care system that will be more profound than anything that has happened since the entire restructuring of our profession during the Flexner era.

Art Buchwald is fond of telling graduating classes: "We are giving you a perfect world—so don't louse it up." I only wish this were true. Problems of escalating health care costs, rapid technological change, fragmentation of care, inadequate access and many other aspects have led to public outcry about the health care system.

Within your professional lifetimes, medicine will change in ways that my teachers could never have imagined. But you have had the good fortune to have a dean and a faculty with a vision of the commensurate changes in medical education. As a result, you have been prepared in a way that no other class before you has ever been prepared for the future.

As faculty, we may not have always given you what you wanted; but I believe we have given you what you will need to succeed and find meaning in this new world. Faculty, like parents, sometimes have to be willing to

* Associate professor
Director of child and adolescent psychiatric training
John A Burns School of Medicine
University of Hawaii

inflict discomfort in the service of our students' growth. There have been many times in the past 4 years when we have insisted that you learn something the hard way, when it might have been much easier for us to have said: "Do it this way, because I said so." Your new curriculum's emphasis on self-directed learning, on teamwork, with the orientation on community, and critical appraisal; these things will be your lifeline, the vine that will sustain you as you face the challenges ahead.

There are some who fear the changes we are about to witness will so radically alter the face of medicine that it will no longer have meaning as a profession. I think this will never occur as long as you also keep your focus on the skills you have learned that are timeless—the art and science of healing. Much of what we currently associate with the practice of medicine is artifact, and is minimally essential to the healing process.

At the risk of using too many metaphors, I would like to tell you another story: One day a woman was about to cook a roast. Before putting it into the pot, she cut off a small slice. When her daughter asked why she did this, she said it was because her mother had always done the same thing when she cooked a roast. The woman's own curiosity aroused, she telephoned her mother to ask her why she always cut off a little slice before cooking her roast. The mother's answer was the same, "Because that's the way my mother did it." Finally, in need of a more helpful answer, the woman asked her grandmother why she always cut off a little slice before cooking a roast. Without hesitating, her grandmother replied, "Because that's the only way it would fit in my pot."

I would like to suggest to you new medical doctors that many of the things that might be lost by changes in our new health care system are not truly essential to our mission as healers. Some things might have been important at one time, but are no longer relevant, like slicing the edge of a roast for a pot that has long since increased in size. Money, entrepreneurial status, independence and power that have been associated in the past with our profession are nice, but they are not the heart and soul of medicine. As you participate in this ensuing process of change I urge you to keep your focus on our patient's best interest, and not on your self-interest.

So—where is the strawberry that I promised you? If you look to your patient's best interest you will find it. Essential to all healing is the physician-patient relationship. As Dr Hilfiger put it: "In this we have an awesome privilege. We are trusted with the darkest secrets, offered the deepest pain and the richest joy, allowed to share in the times of greatest mystery."

The relationship between physician and patient is a sacred trust that must always be honored as such; it is the soul of medicine, and always will be. If you never lose sight of this, then not only will you survive the changes of the future, you will taste the luscious strawberries that this profession has to offer. Medicine is a great profession.

It is a sweet pleasure for me to be able to welcome you as colleagues on this memorable day.

Open Wide.

This Sub-Zero side-by-side refrigerator/freezer Model 590 is 48" wide, and has nearly 30 cubic feet of storage space. The interior is beautiful as well as utilitarian. Glass shelves promise easy and convenient cleanup, and door shelves may be easily arranged to suit any requirements.

Crisper drawers have individual humidity controls. Egg and dairy product compartment doors are magnetically sealed to maintain food freshness. Ice and instantly chilled water are conveniently accessed through the refrigerator door.

Sub-Zero manufactures the finest side-by-side, exclusive bottom freezer, and unique separate refrigerator and freezer pairs. The 500 Series models come in 30", 36", and 48" widths. Undercounter refrigerators, freezers and ice makers are also available. For the name of a Sub-Zero dealer anywhere in Hawaii, contact Sub-Zero Distributors, Inc. at our Honolulu office 593-1055.



Sub-Zero Distributors, Inc.

250 Ward Avenue, Suite 110, Honolulu, Hawaii 96814 • Telephone (808) 593-1055 • Fax (808) 593-1604

