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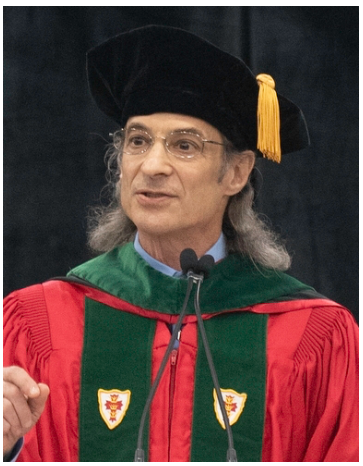

Robert A. Witzburg, MD

Boston University School of Medicine
Commencement

Looking Back and Looking Forward

Dr. Witzburg is Professor of Medicine as well as Associate Dean and Director of Admissions at Boston University School of Medicine (BUISM)—a position he has held since 2002. He also holds a teaching appointment as Professor of Health Policy and Management at Boston University School of Public Health. A 1973 graduate of Tufts University, Dr Witzburg received his M.D. from Boston University School of Medicine in 1977. He completed his internship, residency and chief residency in Medicine at Boston City Hospital, and is board certified in Internal Medicine and Geriatrics. He has practiced as an attending physician in general internal medicine on the Boston University Medical Campus since 1981.

Prior to his current appointments, Dr. Witzburg served as the Training Program Director and Associate Chief of Medicine at Boston City Hospital for 12 years and then as Associate Chief Medical Officer at Boston Medical Center and as the first Medical Director of the Boston Medical Center HealthNet Plan. He was the first Chief of the Section of Community Medicine at Boston Medical Center and Boston University School of Medicine, serving in that capacity and as Vice Chair of the Department of Medicine from 1997-2002. Dr. Witzburg was also a founder, President, and Medical Director of the Neighborhood Health Plan, a community health center based HMO focused on enhancing the quality and scope of health care services available to vulnerable populations. He edited the first clinical manual for care of HIV disease in primary care practice in the mid 1980's and has published on aspects of health care systems development, on topics in acute care medicine and on the selection of applicants for medical school. His work has appeared in the New England Journal of Medicine, The Journal of General Internal Medicine, The American Journal of Preventive Medicine, The American Journal of Medicine, Academic Medicine, The Journal for the Care of the Poor and Underserved, and The Advisor, as well as in several medical textbooks and clinical manuals. He serves as a reviewer for the Annals of Internal Medicine and the Journal of General Internal Medicine.

Dr. Witzburg has been a leader, at the national level, in the transition of medical school admissions programs to a focus on holistic review as a tool to enhance the diversity of the physician workforce. He has established BUSM as a model program in this area and has developed unique systems for the use of technology to facilitate individualized review. He served as the Northeast Region representative to the AAMC National Committee on Admissions for 3 years, and then as the chair of that committee for 3 years. He was a member of the Advisory Committee for Holistic Review, as well as the Advisory Committee for Criminal Background Checks. He has also been involved in diversity initiatives at the undergraduate level with The College Board, as well in Science, Technology, and Math (STEM) programs in a collaborative sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the National Science Foundation.

Dean Zamansky, distinguished faculty, graduates, and honored guests. Please allow me to begin by thanking the Dr. Zamansky for that exceedingly generous and, I fear, largely undeserved introduction. I also want to thank our graduates for giving me the privilege of addressing you today. That said, I must also confess that I stand before you terrified. Not anxious, not uneasy, not nervous, but terrified.

And I don't think it is the fact that I am speaking to a large audience—I have, throughout my career, spent a lot of time in front of audiences. No, it isn't that. Nor is it that I am afraid of embarrassing myself—I do that all the time—I'm used to it. I guess the reason I am terrified is related to one accomplishment in my life that Dean Zamansky did not mention in his introduction. That is, I believe, with a high degree of confidence, that I hold the uncontested world record for the most graduations attended by any living soul. I really think this is true. You heard that I have been on this faculty for 37 years, and I guess I have attended 35 BUSM commencements as a member of the faculty. There were, of course, my own graduations from various schools through medical school and residency. My wife and I have been together since we were kids, so I've attended all of her graduations, through college and graduate school. She taught high school for 42 years and attended most of those graduations, with me there as moral support. So, you see, we are already up to about 90 commencements, and this does not include our 2 children, whose graduations I attended from pre-school, elementary school, middle school, high school, college, graduate school, and law school. And they are married, so throw in their spouses and I estimate I have attended approximately 120 graduations.

The point of this is that I have, therefore, endured ... I mean sat through … I mean had the privilege of hearing about 120 commencement addresses and I remember … not a word of any of them. Not a sentiment, not phrase, not a word. Some of those commencement speakers have been old, some of them have been young. Some of them have been very important, established figures with dignity and with gravitas, while others have not had those characteristics. Once we had a commencement speaker at the medical school show up wearing a clown suit. I know, I didn't get it then and I don't get it now. A few years ago, Senator John Kerry was our medical school commencement speaker—a decorated war hero, who had, by then, served several terms in the U.S. Senate and had run for President of the United States. He didn't win, but he did get about 55 million votes. No pressure. Now, as some of you may recall, John Kerry is a tall, rather patrician-looking Boston Brahman who always wears impeccably tailored dark

suits and has a full head of perfectly coiffed hair that always looks ever so slightly wind-blown and rakish. I remember we were lining up for the processional, all of us dressed in our full academic regalia and there was Senator Kerry—wearing his borrowed BU Red robe, but no cap. Our Dean, not someone who lets a detail slip by, walked right up to him and said, "… Senator Kerry, with respect, we ask everyone to wear the full outfit—gown and cap." And he said, "Dean Antman, with respect, Kerry men don't wear hats." I remember all of that, but I haven't got a clue what he said in his address.

I tell you all of this because I was truly honored by the invitation to speak today but, over time I came to wonder if this was actually a gift, or a curse. Because you see, I gradually become focused on, increasingly obsessed with, ultimately possessed by the need to be different from those 120 less-than-memorable commencement speakers. I wanted to say something, anything, that somebody out there would remember. Best of all, something that would make an enduring impression on our graduates, something that they would take with them throughout their careers … Right. I know, not sensible, not feasible, not even rational, but this became my cross to bear and I have carried it with me for months. I have had many sleepless nights.

In fact, during one of those sleepless nights a few weeks ago, I tossed and turned enough to awaken my wife, who asked me what was wrong. I told her that I was just really hung-up on this commencement address thing for the BA-MD Program. That I just couldn't figure out what to say, how to be different from all the others. She thought about it for moment—this is, after all, the middle of the night—and finally said, "just remember that being a commencement speaker is exactly like being the dead person at a funeral." My reaction precisely, leading me to say "this is not comforting me. Please tell me how it is that being a commencement speaker is exactly like being the dead person at a funeral." To which she replied, "it is simple; in both cases they can't start without you … but nobody expects you to say much."

This advice, in the end, perhaps surprisingly, turned out to be quite useful, because it helped me move away from focusing on what I should tell the graduates, to what I should ask the graduates. So, I am not going to tell you anything but, rather, I am going to ask you something, to pose a challenge, in the form of a riddle.

And here it is: What is the question for which this BA-MD Program is the answer? I guess you could rephrase this riddle by asking yourself, "why am I here today"? Clearly, I don't mean why are you in this place, but rather, why are you in this moment.

Now the interesting thing about this riddle is that there are no wrong answers nor is there a single right answer. In fact, there are 22 of you in this graduating class, so there are 22 correct answers. But, there is a problem: This riddle is challenging and nobody can help you with it. We, your teachers and mentors can't answer this for you, your classmates can't either, nor can your family and friends who are here with us today. Only you can discover your own uniquely personal answer to this riddle. Only you can dig down deep inside, where you keep your most treasured dreams, where you nurture your most lofty goals, where you drop your guard, look in your internal mirror, and face unafraid who you are and who you hope to be.

I don't mean what discipline of science you will pursue, or what specialty you will practice. I mean, who is the person you wish to be and how will your work help you get to that place? It is often said that, "the devil is in the details," but we should also remember that the magic is in the concept—in the big picture, in the one great idea that we each hold dear.

This is hard stuff, but you are not unprepared. All of you have met academic and personal challenges; all of you have had successes and failures; all of you have sacrificed much and accomplished a great deal to reach this moment. And as you move ahead in your study of medicine and, ultimately, the grand adventure of the practice of medicine, each of you will struggle, each of you will have doubts, and at some point, each of you will stop in your tracks and wonder, "what was I possibly thinking when I got myself into this?" In these difficult moments, you will be sustained by your own skill and talent, your own resilience and strength of character, the support of your colleagues, the love of your family and friends, and at your core, a belief in the righteousness of service though the practice of medicine. I urge you to never lose sight of whatever it is that drives you to work, to struggle, and to sacrifice, for it is that north star, that centering point that renders it all sensible and meaningful. It is not the individual discoveries, nor even the particular patients but rather, the arc of your own history, as you write it that will endure and become part of you.

And what about this remarkable institution that is the Boston University School of Medicine. You are at the beginning of your careers, while I am nearing the end of mine. What is it that binds us all together? What is the shared experience of our time at BUSM? What is it that we have in common?

The cultural context within which we study, and work, and practice has changed enormously over the decades and current biomedical science is almost unrecognizable from the perspective of my own start in this profession. The technology and science of clinical practice change, almost by the minute; new specialties and subspecialties have developed, whole new disciplines of science

and research have been created. The pressure on investigators to be productive and on clinicians to provide stewardship for scarce societal resources is real and ever more intense.

Much has changed but at the core of our experience at BUSM lies an eternal truth about our profession. From the earliest days of our predecessor institution, The New England Female Medical College, all the way to the present, our school has understood its role in society as being one of offering opportunity where little-or-none may exist elsewhere. We learn that our effort to advance the frontiers of science and to improve the clinical practice has value ultimately in its application to the improvement of life for the most vulnerable among us. As clinicians we learn that Francis Weld Peabody was correct when he sat at his desk at Boston City Hospital, on our campus, in 1926, and wrote, "The secret to the care of the patient is in caring for the patient." Knowledge has a short half-life, but empathy and caring never get old.

At BU, we come to understand that our most solemn obligation, our most sacred trust, as physicians, is also our greatest privilege. That we must do our best for the people we serve, not because of who they are, not because of the color of their skin or the language they speak, not because of what part of our society they may represent, and not because of their ability to pay, but just because of the fundamental humanity we all share.

This is the gift of our school that spans the generations; the almost visceral awareness that each of us can be a revolutionary just by doing that for which we have studied so long and trained so hard. That we advance our science with integrity and that we care for our patients with dignity, with compassion, and with respect simply because it is the right thing to do. This is, I believe, at the heart of what we have all learned at BU. This is what binds us all together, this is what is special, and this is what makes us proud.

If you carry this with you into your future as physicians I am quite certain, that you will end your careers as I end mine – believing that you have done well by doing good, taking delight in the fact that you have never had an uninteresting day, nor gone home without having learned something new, and that your work has been, not a burden, but one of the greatest gifts of your life. I thank you for the opportunity to be a part of your commencement today and I wish you all well.

Go in peace.