

Thursday, May 4, 2017

Good evening.

This is one of my favorite moments. Thursday night at Kent. The hustle of the week is almost over. The long, beautiful spring days quietly end. There is still that freshman boy running up chapel lawn, unable to figure out how to tie a tie and his shoes in one go. For a few minutes, we relax. Nearly everything else can wait. Thank you for letting me spend these few minutes with you.

This is what I'm going to talk about. First, I'll tell you a little bit about myself and my life as a doctor-in-training. Then I'm going to be a bit more serious. I'm going to talk about our privilege and how I've thought about making the most of my own. And finally I'll conclude with a few words for the seniors in particular.

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I graduated from Kent thirteen years ago, in 2004. Not that long ago, but not yesterday. I have many fond memories of my time at Kent. Mr. Heslop, my classmate shows up in quite a few of them. I edited the Kent News, ran cross-country, and played on the lacrosse team. I think I had a Bob Marley poster despite the fact that I knew maybe two of his songs. It was a formative time in my life, just as I'm sure it has been for each of you. My junior year I took AP Biology with Mr. Houston and something clicked for me. I discovered my curiosity for the natural sciences and biology in particular. I remember the way in which I loved putting in the time for most (keyword most) of the lab reports and exams. The desire to make the effort came naturally. I was far from the top student in our class but it was something I wanted to work hard at. That feeling turned out to be very important for my life later on. As Mr. Hobbs said during lacrosse practice one afternoon, "You may not be able to control how much natural talent you have, but you can control the effort you put in for your goals."

I went to Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota where I studied History and Environmental Studies and I had a fantastic time. I loved Carleton. I enjoyed studying history but in part, I chose it as a major because it was familiar to me and perhaps, for that reason, less challenging, less interesting. As college started to wind down I needed to meet a science requirement so I signed up for an Ecology class. And then, a few weeks into the course, this feeling came back to me, that love of science that I remembered from AP Biology. The class had a lab component and I watched myself as we developed our hypotheses, gathered our data, ran the analysis, wrote up our results. There was this joy to it for me. I think I found the empiricism reassuring, we can measure an outcome instead of the inconclusiveness of debate. Whatever the reasons that I was so excited, it was obvious that this class was something I wanted to work hard at.

After graduation, I moved to Mali which is a landlocked country in West Africa, smack in the middle of the Sahara desert. It's hot as you imagine it to be if not more so. I was working for a biofuel company that had a business model of recruiting rural farmers, most of whom were living on less than \$1/day to plant biofuel crops as a way to boost their income. I spent a lot of time in rural villages, somewhat romantically somewhat uncomfortably sleeping on a therm-a-rest, usually outside with a mosquito net tied to a couple of chairs or trees. Imagine the distance I felt from Kent and the places I'd called home. But you learn about the amazing diversity of people that are in this world when you step outside of your comfort zone. And to me, just like with science I was hooked. So I put two and two together: love of science and working with people and there was medicine. And that's what I do today, finishing up medical school. So looking back, I can trace my path back to Kent pretty easily. So pay attention, perhaps something you love that you're doing right now will become part of your life long passion, maybe even central a central component of your career.

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But more than learning the Electron Transport Chain or memorizing those first lines of the Canterbury Tales ("Whan that April with his showers soot"), above all, the lesson from Kent that I carry with me every day is to be aware of my good fortune.

I trust that you all know that you are lucky and I'm not going to lecture about privilege, you all get that.

*[See, we have privilege to do what we love and that is exceptionally rare. Think about it, has anyone at Kent ever truly stood in your way when you brought them a thoughtful, impassioned idea? I doubt it. Instead they probably bent over backwards to help you do it or at least didn't stop you from trying.]*

So instead here's my question for you, "Life dealt you an incredible hand, how do you want to play your cards?" And as you think about that big question allow me to offer that I don't believe there is any one right way.

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What I've come up with is this. I think we should do what we love doing and then find a way to improve the world through doing that thing. For me, science and people equals medicine. And beyond that, rural Africa, so medicine in rural Africa is what my non-profit focuses on. But if you love to paint, then paint, capture the world with the provocative thoughtfulness of Rauschenberg and Twombly. If you love to write, point out the ironies of society with the precision of Mark Twain or the insight of David Foster Wallace. If you're a computer science whiz, you'll be employed, and will keep our economy going. And we appreciate that. And you can design systems that change the way people interact around the globe. If you love to row down the Housatonic or to play lacrosse, keep with it and share your sport with the world, or similarly, create amazing teams in business, public service, or education, health. *My*

*point is don't make betterment of the world extracurricular to your cause, make it central to it.*

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I'll give an example. I have a Kent School classmate who right now is studying Aerospace Engineering at Stanford and works at NASA. A few months ago he and I were having dinner and I asked him to explain his long term goal. He told me that he wants to be an Astronaut. But he doesn't want to just go to space. His goal is to go farther than anyone has ever traveled before in space. He then explained to me, completely seriously, "Well Tim, the technology still isn't quite there yet." But that is not his point. He has set his sights literally beyond the stars. I find that to be extraordinary. It is his love and what it does to make the world a better place, in addition to science and discovery is to inspire. And he, like me, like you, sat in these seats.

*Life dealt you an incredible hand, how do you want to play it?*

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Before I conclude, I want to point out a different form of privilege other than that of having the opportunity to do what we love. This one wasn't as clear to me when I was your age. This other form of privilege is the privilege of what people assume about you. For example, people assume that I'm a white male, American, doctor. My patients don't distinguish between medical student and physician. So assumed privilege can be inaccurate, because it assumed, not known. But it can also open doors. And that is worth pointing out as well. If you don't believe me, consider that as a guy walking down the street people don't stop me to tell me their most intimate personal health details out of the blue. To them, I'm a stranger. But when I step into clinic, put on my white coat, drape my stethoscope around my neck and all of a sudden it goes from total stranger to "Hey Doc, would you take a look at this rash..." Or, "Dr. Singer, I'm going through a divorce with my abusive partner and I need help." In medicine, this is a sacred privilege, the doctor-patient relationship. It is why we protect our patient's privacy so steadfastly and fight for their access to healthcare. But whether you are a doctor or not, people are going to assume things about you. They will see the poise with which you carry yourselves when you walk into the room. They will hear your eloquence because you learned how to articulate your thoughts and defend your ideas in a Kent School classroom. They will trust the goodness of your hearts because you come from a community capable of enormous love. So as you think about your opportunity privilege, think also about how you can use your assumed privilege.

See assumed privilege is really bias. It is unfair. But it just so happens the bias is in our favor sometimes and because of that we have the opportunity to breakdown walls that others might have a harder time knocking down. That means that because I'm an American, white, doctor (almost) that people might listen to me when I talk about healthcare inequity in Africa more than perhaps than if my Rwandan patients were to advocate for themselves only. You've heard the saying that silence make us

implicit in inequity. But consider that because of bias playing to your favor, to my favor, we are in a privileged position to speak up, to take action. So it is ironic, we can make the world a more equal place because of the inherent inequity that benefitted us. Privilege does not afford us the luxury of passivity, it empowers us to become engaged. So in addition to asking you to think about how you're going to play your hand, to find what you love to do, I'm asking you also to choose equity over inequity.

*Pause*

Seniors, during the next month you will be offered a lot of advice for college and life. Here is mine. *Take care of your body and that includes your mental health.*

There will be stress, and long nights, and toga parties. But get enough sleep, eat healthy food, exercise a few times a week, pay attention to how you're feeling. Doing these things will help you get to wherever it is that you have set your sights on going. Perhaps even beyond the stars.

Thank you all for listening. Peace be with you.