

Learning from inspirational leaders in a time of crisis

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During these trying months of late, I have been comforted and impressed to see the leadership and professionalism demonstrated by our medical professionals on all fronts. It has been truly amazing to watch them during this COVID-19 pandemic, leading our country in saving lives, conducting research, and pressing forward to develop a vaccine and find a cure. They truly exemplify the AΩA motto of “Be Worthy to Serve the Suffering.”

It has been extremely difficult for all of us as we have been socially distancing, isolating, and remembering our family, friends, and colleagues who have perished during this horrendous pandemic. We have watched our local, national, and global world turn upside down. We have experienced tumultuous acts of violence and hatred the likes of which I never thought possible in my lifetime. Through it

all, we have changed, grown as individuals and as a country, and have become resolute in our commitment to our profession, each other, and our patients and community.

For me, perseverance and resilience have come from what I can learn from others—the inspirational quotes, the historical writings, and the stories of those who came before me. On March 17, 2020, we moved the AΩA office and all staff to working remotely, and have maintained our remote home offices since, though we meet often via Zoom videoconferences. I miss the socialization and commiseration a physical office environment, team, and colleagues bring. While we have maintained contact via videoconferencing, it’s just not the same.

I have learned a lot from, and during, the SARS COVID-19 pandemic, much from personal reflection. I suggest that each of you reflect on what you have

learned, and can teach others, from your experiences in clinical care, practice, teaching, as a leader, and as a role model, parent, and member of your community. We can collectively learn from this health and social crisis and use it as an opportunity for change, working together to improve systems and responses to better serve society.

When a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic occurs, we often turn to history to learn from the past and develop strategies to help us deal with and manage the current crisis. We also turn to our current leaders for guidance, support, education, and interpretation of the science. Dr. Anthony Fauci (AQA, Weill Cornell Medical College, 1965) has been a beacon providing perspective and guidance—don't underestimate the potential of the pandemic; stick to science; adapt to new information; and address disparities.

While science and experience should guide the response, in most epidemics the earliest response is a social denial that this infectious disease will have a major effect, and many ignore the evidence until the numbers of ill and dying force most to acknowledge the crisis. Even at this point many still do not accept the full impact of the crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the current U.S. health care system is dysfunctional and extremely limited, especially when implemented using the “federalist” model. Utilizing 50 state-based versions or “systems” of health care does not work for the whole of America. Health care in the U.S. is considered to be an economic good where patients are analogous to commodities, and services are provided based primarily on an individual's purchasing power. However, illness and injury, like the COVID-19 pandemic are not subject to market decision-making like other commodities or products. Unfortunately, there is not an organized health care system in the U.S. to address what we are currently suffering through.

Leadership is critical for the medical profession and for the future of the best health care and doctors caring for patients and communities. While leadership is essential in any crisis and often brings out the best in leaders and leadership, when I reflect on national leadership during this crisis, I wonder what lessons we have, and should have, learned. Has the U.S. been the best or

even among the best in dealing with this pandemic? We have been faced with a public health crisis that we had planned for over decades, but what happened?

In previous international epidemics and potential pandemics, the U.S. has successfully shared and helped implement interventions. Testing, surveillance, contact tracing, isolation, quarantine, and communication are the fundamental steps in responding to a pandemic. As a country we spent countless hours training for just such a crisis. Even with all of this pre-planning, we found ourselves

unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals responded despite the hazard to themselves and their families. They learned and experienced firsthand how

to provide progressively better care to effectively decrease morbidity and mortality.

In addition to understanding the virology and epidemiology of the COVID-19 virus, medical professionals were relying on national leadership to provide our profession, and other national leaders and the public, with honest, factual, up-to-date information about the pandemic and the actions required to slow and control the virus and its medical, social, and economic impact. Misinformation and capricious statements and other communications interfered with the societal and public health measures needed to control the pandemic. We lacked consistency of messaging and clear direction.

As we had trained for decades, we needed to use scientific data in rapidly developing and implementing medical and societal interventions. Like in other epidemics and pandemics, we needed to implement effective public health measures—social restrictions, universal testing, contact tracing, isolation, quarantine, and data collection. On the bright side, we moved swiftly and utilized the best science to successfully develop new and effective vaccines.

There are many, many lessons to be learned from this pandemic and our national response. We need to learn from each of these lessons—good and bad—and reflect on the opportunities for leadership, empathy, honesty, support, wise decision-making, and active implementation of strategic interventions. This will help inform us how to lead going forward.

“There is always a light, if only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it.”¹

– Amanda Gorman
National Youth Poet Laureate

Too few doctors see themselves as leaders or future leaders. This is unfortunate, because doctors are highly educated professionals from a community of practice with great capacity to use their knowledge, skills, and commitment to be important and great leaders. Perhaps these recent experiences will motivate many to take the inward journey and pursue leading and leadership. I urge each of you to reflect on your observations and experiences, both failures and successes, in your practice, organization, and community and develop a plan for what to do as well as what not to do when faced with the next crisis. Learning to lead is clearly experiential, but coaches, mentors, colleagues, and role models are also compulsory. A crisis, like COVID-19, clarifies the need for great leadership and emphasizes needed leadership competencies that will hopefully provoke many in medicine to pursue becoming a leader.

Personal reflection and inspiration

A while back, like many others who have been looking at the same four walls of their home office for months (seems like years), I began to reorganize and clean. While going through several dusty boxes of old files, I came across a file that I had saved for many, many years. It contained myriad emotional, inspirational, persuasive, and poignant poems, quotes and prayers that I had saved over the years.

As I read each piece, I reflected on what was happening in my life at the time that I decided to save that particular piece. I remembered when I was a young intern, a resident, a new attending, a department chair, the chancellor of a large university, and the other experiences in my life that have brought me to where I am today. I remembered the feeling I had when I first read each piece. Many of the feelings flooded back to me—some happy, some encouraging, some not so happy, and some heart wrenching. However, each brought me solace in its own way.

The poem “If,” by Rudyard Kipling (1856-1936)² may be my favorite poem of all time. I have always remembered it during strenuous times. It is a poem that slows my breathing and brings me back to center. While originally written from the male perspective, “And—which is more—you’ll be a Man my son!”¹ it should be read from an equitable point of view with the understanding that it could easily read, “And—which is more—you’ll be a Woman my daughter!” From any point, Kipling’s “If” provides a message of understanding, thoughtfulness, caring, and centeredness.

Another poet, essayist, lecturer, and philosopher who has often helped me focus is Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803-1882). Emerson has one particular quote that has been credited many times over to him but was actually originally written by Bessie Anderson Stanley (born Caroline Elizabeth Anderson, March 25, 1879–October 2, 1952), an American writer. I have regularly turned to this quote throughout my career:

To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.³

This quote has always reminded me that your success is in who you truly are, not the title you have attained.

Early on in my career, I was given an amended version of Maimonides’ “Daily Prayer Of A Physician.” This amended version was longer and more in-depth than the original, but it resonated with how I was feeling at the time, and many other times throughout my career. When I have felt overwhelmed, lost a patient, or felt as though I was on the verge of burning out, I would turn to this prayer to help me focus on the importance of the profession I have chosen. There is one paragraph in particular that remains exceedingly poignant for me:

Inspire me with love for my art and for Thy creatures. Do not allow thirst for profit, ambition for renown and admiration, to interfere with my profession, for these are the enemies of truth and of love for mankind and they can lead astray in the great task of attending to the welfare of Thy creatures. Preserve the strength of my body and of my soul that they ever be ready to cheerfully help and support rich and poor, good and bad, enemy as well as friend. In the sufferer let me see only the human being. Illumine my mind that it recognizes what presents itself and that it may comprehend what is absent or hidden. Let it not fail to see what is visible, but do not permit it to arrogate itself the power to see what cannot be seen, for delicate and indefinite are the bounds of the great art of caring for the lives and health of Thy creatures. Let me never be absent-minded. May no strange thoughts divert my attention at the bedside of the sick, or disturb my mind in its silent labors, for great and sacred are the thoughtful deliberations required to preserve the lives and health of Thy creatures.⁴

If—

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:*

*If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'*

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*



RUDYARD KIPLING



Sir William Osler (1849-1919) a Canadian physician and one of the four founding professors of Johns Hopkins Hospital. Dated 1918. Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

I would be remiss if I didn't reflect on Sir William Osler, his experiences, and his wisdom. Some of my favorite Osler quotes are:⁵

You are in this profession as a calling, not as a business; as a calling which exacts from you at every turn self-sacrifice, devotion, love and tenderness to your fellow men...You must work in the missionary spirit, with a breadth of charity that raises you far above the petty jealousies of life.

We are at the mercy of our wills much more than our intellect in the formation of beliefs, which we adopt in a lazy, haphazard way without taking much trouble to enquire into their foundation.

Dealing as we do with poor, suffering humanity, we see the man unmasked, or so to speak, we see him in his uni-

form, exposed to all the frailties and weaknesses, and you have got to keep your heart pretty soft and pretty tender not to get too great a contempt for your fellow creatures.

The load of to-morrow, added to that of yesterday, carried to-day make the strongest falter. Shut off the future as tightly as the past. No dreams, no visions, no delicious fantasies, no castles in the air, with which, as old song so truly says, "hearts are broken, heads are turned." To youth we are told, belongs the future, but the wretched to-morrow that so plagues some of us has no certainty, except through to-day. Who can tell what a day may bring forth?...The future is to-day—there is no to-morrow! The day of a man's salvation is now—the life of the present, of to-day, lived earnestly, intently, without a forward-looking thought, is the only insurance for the future. Let the limit of your horizon be a twenty-four-hour circle.

The physician's challenge is the curing of disease, educating the people in the laws of health, and preventing the spread of plagues and pestilences.

When you have made and recorded the unusual or original observation, or when you have accomplished a piece of research in laboratory or ward, do not be satisfied with a verbal communication at a medical society. Publish it.

And not only in what has been actually accomplished in unravelling the causes of disease, in perfecting methods of prevention, and in wholesale relief of suffering, but also in the unloading of old formulae and in the substitution of the scientific spirit of free inquiry for cast-iron dogmas we see a promise of still greater achievement and of a more glorious future.

Throughout my career I have had many mentors, been lucky enough to be a mentor to many individuals, and presented countless speeches and lectures, and through it all have always focused on how important our personal values are and how they must be in alignment with those of our employer. The ethics of an individual are extremely important, as are those of an organization. One should never compromise their values because they are different from those of their employer. Stanley Joel Reiser, in the Hastings Center Report of 1994,⁶ provided a list of values that every health care organization should adhere to: humaneness, reciprocal benefit, trust, fairness, dignity, gratitude, service, and stewardship. I have always remembered these values in my daily life, and in institutions in which I have had the privilege of being in a leadership role. An institution that truly portrays and observes these values, is one that will be successful for its faculty, staff, patients, and community. We must push health care employers educational organizations to conscientiously advocate for, and support the physicians, nurses and other health professionals in adopting and promoting these medical professional values.

I unequivocally believe that the humanities, science and medicine are resolutely intertwined. There is an Edmund Pellegrino (1920-2013) quote that I strive to adhere to every day as a physician, as well as a humanist:

Medicine is the most scientific of the humanities and the most humane of sciences. It bridges the physical state of the human being with her psychological state, and I daresay with her spiritual state...That is not just a person's

religion, but those transcendent aspects of what she is—and values—beyond the merely material domains of being.⁷

In that dusty old file, I also found a piece I had written several years ago as a participant at a conference. We were asked to state our purpose in life and our personal definition of success. I wrote:

My purpose in life is to consciously and constructively live my definition of success.

Success to me is:

Creating change, challenging myself, competing passionately, making a contribution, being on the razor's edge, excelling as a teacher and role model, communicating openly and honestly, honoring myself, and maintaining my fitness and health.

My hope is that by sharing these pearls of inspiration, wisdom, leadership, and success that I rediscovered in that dusty file, I have made your day a little brighter, and that as we look to the future, we can see the light at the end of the tunnel. We can see a day when we have expunged this horrendous virus and when we can once again come together for hugs, celebrations, and work. My hope is that you will find your old file of inspirational quotes, prayers, poems, and sayings, and spend some personal time reflecting and recentering.

References

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