Commencement
Georgetown University School of Nursing & Health Studies

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Dr. DeGioia, Dean Iguchi, Dr. Federoff, administrators, faculty, and especially graduates and your loved ones – parents, siblings, extended family and friends.

It is an honor and a privilege to be with you today as you celebrate this milestone in your life’s journey. I am also deeply grateful to receive this honorary degree from Georgetown University School of Nursing & Health Studies.

As I prepared for this talk, I asked many friends and colleagues what – if anything – they remembered of their graduation speaker. The answer, perhaps not surprisingly, but certainly most sobering, was not much! What I remember of my medical school graduation was the pride I felt in front of my parents, the excitement about the opportunities ahead, oh, and also the fact that I was wearing a little black dress my mother had made for herself when we lived in Saigon 30 years earlier. Some of my past was going with me into my future.

Looking back now, I see that the future I imagined that day is quite different from where I’ve ended up, and my journey continues to be full of surprises! Today, a journey begins for each of you that can not be easily charted in advance. As my career path illustrates, the degree you have worked so hard to earn is just a beginning, not an end. And so, as I start this talk with you, I do so hoping to be memorable, yes, but also to be a beginning, to share what lessons my somewhat unconventional career path has taught me in hopes that they prove useful to you.

The first lesson is that change is constant in life.

This will likely be even more so the case for you. You are graduating at a time of unprecedented change in health care in this country – a rate of change perhaps unseen in 50 years – or since the establishment of Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960’s.

The passage of the Affordable Care Act, the growing demand for better value from care, the exploding application of technology to medical care and our social interactions and finally the impact of spiraling health care costs on all aspects of our national economy and policy discourse are just some of the forces behind this change.
As new professionals in health you can choose to ride these changes to great opportunity and benefit. You have sharpened a great skill these last few years that will stand you in good stead – you have learned how to learn.

And learning will be essential as the world changes around us. In our professional careers we need to keep updating our knowledge, challenging our assumptions – or someone else will and they will change the ground rules so that we have to adapt or fail. We are in a world where eminence based medicine is giving way to evidence based medicine and evidence based management. Science is changing not only what we understand about biological mechanisms of health and disease but also our understanding of how care delivery can be more effective and higher value.

We are inundated with data - whether it is proteomics or performance measurement, patient reported outcomes or health care analytics - data is now everywhere and our challenge is to learn how to use these data to create information, knowledge and wisdom to improve care. Your skills, your knowledge, your innovation and your creativity will find fertile soil in which to grow and bloom.

Change is constant. And you will change.

The second lesson I have learned on my winding career path is the importance of being prepared when change presents an opportunity you might not have foreseen.

When I studied statistics in my second year of medical school I was bored to tears. I could not have imagined a time when I would go forward to get my Masters in epidemiology! When I worked as Maternal and Child Health Director in Hawaii, little did I know that my experiences would help me to understand the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration to improve health. And when I chose to pursue a post-doc in health services research and health policy, lo and behold the Director of the Institute, a mentor and later a friend, Dr. Phil Lee became the Assistant Secretary for Health in the Clinton Administration – so these were steps in my path toward my future job at the Department of Health and Human Services.

Your career and your life will present opportunities and challenges. Your training has prepared you to seek knowledge in science and the tradition of this fine institution compels you to seek justice. I will tell you to seek experience, to layer on life and feed your curiosity so that when change presents opportunity you can become what it is you are to be.

Be prepared.

The third lesson I have learned is the importance of finding the right canvas where your passion can fully bloom. What do I mean by that? Each of you will contribute to better health and health care in this country or internationally. But not in the same way, you will
each find the right medium to express your passion. Here’s what I mean. John Eisenberg, the former director of the Agency for Healthcare Policy and Research, the agency that became AHRQ, once asked me what ‘lit a fire in my belly.’ I was well into my career at that point, and it should have been an easy question. I answered by telling him what I did. He stopped me and pushed harder. He wanted to know what I was truly passionate about. For me, that was children’s health. John gave me the nudge I needed to go back to researching and publishing where I was passionate.

So here I want to use some visual aids in the hopes of being a little bit more memorable.

[HOLDS UP NURSE DOLL]

This is supposed to be a nurse.

For those among you whose passion is direct care and who will go on to become registered nurses, you will be given access to others’ most joyous and most painful moments – you will have the ultimate privilege of glancing into the souls of individuals in need. You will understand that – as a saying with uncertain origins goes – “our lives are not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.” The birth of my twins, hearing my lymph nodes were free of cancer, holding my mother’s hand as she died. These are the moments that took my breath away. As nurses, you will have the privilege and burden of sharing breathless moments and you will help. You may not always know it at the end of each day, but you will be helping.

Some of the future nurses among you today will go on to become Advanced Practice Registered Nurses and do so at a time of growing demand for your services. Based on Massachusetts’ experience with health reform, we expect the Affordable Care Act to dramatically increase the demand for primary care services. Advanced Practice Registered Nurses will be part of the solution! You will help by providing care to millions who were previously uninsured and did not have access to high quality primary care. You will have many opportunities to live your passion and you will help!

[HOLDS UP ADMINISTRATOR DOLL]

Others of you have chosen a different canvas and will go on to become managers and administrators of health care services – see the badge– whether in hospitals, in accountable care organizations, in community health centers. You will focus on improving the safety, quality and value of the services your institutions deliver for groups of patients. You will seek to heal a system that is plagued by inefficiency, inequity, and increasing cost. You are already well aware of how far we have to go to achieve care that is reliably safe, of high quality, and efficient. You will develop and test new ways to organize, deliver and pay for care. You may not know it at the end of each day, but your passion will help untold thousands live a better life.
[HOLDS UP COMMUNITY LEADER DOLL]

Some of you will find that your skills and passion need an even larger canvas, or perhaps a different gallery all together. Maybe you will want to work with entire communities in this country or internationally to improve their health and wellbeing, eliminate disparities, and strive for health equity. We hear more today about population health than ever before in my career. Historically, concern over the health of populations has been too often relegated to those of us who chose careers in public health. Today, hospitals, health plans, and employers are also focusing on denominators – entire populations - recognizing the need to move upstream and promote better health and – let’s be honest here – understanding that to control costs we have to create healthier communities. This will not be easy work and your passion is sorely needed. And you will help.

[HOLDS UP POLICYMAKER DOLL]

And then there are those of you who will ultimately find your fit in the policy world, as I have. Who will recognize that the laws, policies, regulations and incentives we put in place dramatically affect the ability of all the other actors in health care to improve care and support healthier communities. You will resonate with the aphorism I first heard from Don Berwick, the founding CEO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement – that our system is perfectly designed to achieve the results it gets. Poor safety, poor quality and low value are the results of this broken system fraught with misaligned incentives. You will relentlessly pursue better policies to drive improved quality.

And finally, some of you will end up finding your passion in creating the evidence base for better care and a higher performing system. You will choose Health Services Research – my field. For those budding researchers in the audience, come join us! Your innovation and creativity will define new colors for the canvas where we will collectively paint a different policy picture.

So find your canvas for your passion.

I already mentioned John Eisenberg, who also happened to be Chairman of Medicine and Physician-in-Chief here at Georgetown University, and he taught me that the best talks are centered on three points, so I should stop with those three lessons:

1. Change is constant
2. Be prepared and
3. Find your canvas for your passion.

And, while I listened to most of what John taught me, I am going to go out on my own here and share one more lesson with you.
Be kind. Throughout my life I have experienced the kindness of colleagues, of friends, and family. The kindness of nurses, doctors, and other health professionals who cared for me during life threatening illness and the death of my parents. Yet, health care in this country is too often unkind.

A kind word, a kind touch, a kind smile. These are small but oh-so-effective salves for the pain and suffering so many experience in their lives. You will touch the world with your training and your passion, but you will be remembered for your kindness.

We are all of us part of a greater whole – we are the caregivers, the healers. We will make decisions that affect individuals and populations for years to come. We must do so with kindness.

So, I offered you four lessons:

1. Change is constant
2. Be prepared
3. Find your canvas for your passion, and most importantly,
4. Be kind.

I now close with a question – a question not only for our graduates, but for each and every one of us. It is the ending of a beautiful poem by Mary Oliver:

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

To the Georgetown University School of Nursing & Health Studies class of 2013, congratulations on your achievements and best wishes for a glorious, wild and precious