

Beneath the White Coats: A Speech on the Togetherness (or Separation) of Life and Work for a Physician

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This speech was given at the white coat ceremony on 28th October 2021, to the incoming medical school class of 2025 at the Medical School for International Health (MSIH) at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Thank you all for this opportunity. Thank you, Professor Jotkowitz and Professor Clarfield and the entire MSIH staff for reaching out to me. Be'er Sheva, the MSIH family, holds a very special place in my heart. It was an amazing time as a student here, something I appreciate and respect and will always be thankful for. MSIH is a special place and mission.

I have been thinking about what is the best message I can give to you all. Something that hopefully sticks with you beyond the next hour. I thought about all the talks and ceremonies and speeches I have heard over the years, and what has stuck with my poor memory over the years is when the speech is completely personal, with very few walls.

So good luck to us all, and here we go.

I am not a big talker; people complain that I talk too softly, and I mumble. I have been described as a loner; it probably doesn't help that I was/am an only child. I love to operate; I can be in the operating room all day and night easily. You see a problem; you try to fix it! I am in love with what I do. I feel lucky and privileged every day. I am addicted to my work. I have a fear of God in me to be the best I can, so whatever injured patient is in front of me will get what he deserves—meaning the absolute highest level of care.

I am also divorced twice; I have two children from each ex-wife—who are both wonderful moms. Around 3 years ago, when I went to fellowship, the mom of the older daughter returned to Los Angeles, so unfortunately, an ocean and some land lie between us.

You get married a second time, and you think you've learned from your past experiences or won't be involved in the same mistakes twice, and then the second time does not work out, and you're like, what is going on? What can't I get right? Because it is not as clear or as easy for you as taking out a bleeding spleen or an infected appendix, you start going to therapy, which is interesting and frustrating.

The therapist does not give me the answers, does not tell me what to do, which pisses me off. I want therapy to be like taking out the spleen or appendix; just do it. But no, she wants me to think and understand. As I'm sure, you all know, thinking and understanding are not the strongest characteristics of surgeons.

So we get to know each other more, and she starts explaining to me how I have no separation between life and work. I have no conception or idea that these are two different things. When she said this, I was in shock that I was expected to separate these two

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things; I couldn't understand what she was saying. To me, they were impossible to separate, not even different aspects of life—like snot on my kid's face, like blood and other bodily fluids on my Blundstones, or comic genius and Will Ferrell—they are just seen as one. Yet the therapist kept on explaining to me how this was not healthy.

And I just could not find any logic or way to agree with her—the opposite—I feel lucky to have something that works yet does not work for me. Something that I am passionate about and happen to get paid to do. As much as I have failed at other aspects of life, at least with this, I felt like I have succeeded! I follow something from so deep within me that at least this Yin and Yang, this Calvin and Hobbs, this Tango and Cash are working together and are at peace and equilibrium with the universe.

I tried explaining to her how she was completely wrong, amazingly wrong. I showed her a picture and quote I have on my office wall of Dr Alla Levshkina, one of the oldest working surgeons before she recently passed, whose quote put everything together for me, was exactly my point - and I quote, "Why else is the surgeon to live if not to work..."

And even today, I cannot agree that the therapist is right, especially in medicine—which all of you have begun to do. You are here to serve, to become the absolute best you can be, so whoever is sitting or lying in front of you will get the absolute best evidence-based, love-based, passion-based care that they can get anywhere in the world. You are here to serve; it does not make a difference if it is a private clinic in Beverly Hills where the clinic walls are of rubies and gold. It does not make a difference if you are a lowly trauma surgeon in the ghettos of Holon and Jaffa. You are here to serve and help the human sitting or lying in front of you as best as you can, which is what the patient deserves.

And this is not a job; to reach its maximum, it can't be a job—it's a requirement, it's a service, which I believe all of you, all of us, need to be obsessed with. It is an amazing way of life where we are lucky and privileged, where strangers let us into their lives, trust and depend on us within seconds of meeting us. Where families trust and depend on us to help their loved ones, sometimes save the life of their loved ones. And we cannot approach this as a job, and each of you, as I am, is lucky for this.

This does not mean that you cannot have an amazing family and be an amazing mother, father, partner, or dog owner. This does not mean that you cannot have hobbies, be a world-class synchronized swimmer, a ninja warrior, or a rock sculptor. I am sure that I am one of the worst in this room at making this balance, but I know each of you can, and will, and will find this happiness, this balance, and bloom until the stars, together with your loved ones.

I may be wrong, and take it how you will, but I think that success in life and as a physician begins with accepting that this is not a job. Even if, at the end of the day, being a physician (hopefully a surgeon!)

is only 11.5% of your time, it is still life and something we should never completely let go of when you or I leave the walls of the hospital or clinic, and this is okay. It is more than okay; it is wonderful.

Let me end this with a prayer I say to myself every morning during a 2-minute plank (I am trying to reach the world record, I'm not far, I think it is about 9 hours and 30 minutes).

And the prayer I say goes:

"Let me do today as my last day, and at night I will die to sleep; I love you, Shaibug and Noam Lev, do more. Now always, patience, don't eat cake, be kind, be fearful, yet be ferocious and fearless for what you want and what you believe in..."

And that is it. Remember, when you continue along your path, at every junction, may it be residency, partnership, or dog ownership, remember: follow your personality, and follow who you are from the deepest place. And therefore, as is written on my grandmother's gravestone, Grandma Charlotte Tish, in Houston, Texas, "Honey, it's gonna be beautiful..."

Kick ass always with whatever you do! And thank you.