

SPEECH DELIVERED TO ACCELERATED CLASS OF 2003
GRADUATION/PINNING CEREMONY ON JULY 25, 2003

Ronald A. Berk, PhD

First, a word from one of your classmates (tape plays): “Dr. Berk, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to deliver a message to these graduates today that they don’t know, something meaningful, that they will remember at least until dinner time tonight. As always, if you present the typical boring clichés, platitudes, and armchair formulas for success given at other ceremonies, I will disavow all knowledge of your mission. This message will not, I repeat, will not self-destruct in 5 seconds. Destroying a perfectly reusable tape is the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard. This message will end unceremoniously. Bye Bye.” (Theme from *Mission: Impossible* plays.)

Wow! No pressure. Those words, of course, were from your class President, Kate Kuhn. She set the bar really high. Graduates, selecting me to be your speaker here today is the greatest honor you could give a faculty member in our school. I thank you and very much appreciate this opportunity you have given me.

How many of you drove here today? As you were driving, you probably looked in your rear view mirror to see what was behind you or what you passed. Sometimes if you look in that mirror too often, you could end up crashing into the car in front of you because you weren’t looking where you were going. I want you to think of the degree you just completed as your rear view mirror. It’s behind you. It’s now in your past. You did it. In 13 and a half months you finished the premier accelerated nursing program in the country.

In a few days when your celebrations abate, you need to begin focusing on what's in front of you. That's the windshield. That represents your future, your career potential as a nurse.

Notice the size difference between the rear view mirror and the windshield. According to my calculations, rounded to six decimal points, those proportions are correct. This in no way trivializes or diminishes the significance of what you have just accomplished. It just places your degree in the context of the size of your future in nursing.

In fact, you have two rear view mirrors you can place on your windshield: one from your previous degree and the second from the one you just finished. For those of you who are pursuing a master's degree, part-time or full-time this fall, in a couple of years you'll have another rear view mirror. Maybe even some of you will go on for a doctorate. That's probably worth a couple of mirrors. Even with all of those mirrors on your windshield, there is a lot of space left over. The point is that although your academic credentials are absolutely essential for your career advancement, they're not sufficient. There are still other factors that can affect your success in your career. I'd like to suggest five factors you might consider:

1. ***Use your creativity and imagination in all that you do.*** Apply your creativity to your skills and abilities. Usually those skills and abilities can get you to a certain level in your profession. But it's your imagination that can take you to a higher level and frequently distinguish you from the rest of the pack.

When you were a little tyke, you probably had a wild imagination and were totally uninhibited in displaying it. The problem is that, as we grow older,

that imagination becomes stifled and squished inside of our bodies as we become more inhibited. It is now time to unleash your imagination. However, if you are beginning a new job, I would wait a week or two before you do any unleashing. Just a thought.

2. ***Put your whole heart into your job.*** Sometimes you might hear someone say, “She really didn’t have her heart in that,” or “He only made a half-hearted effort.” If you don’t put your heart into what you do, feel that passion or fire from within, or experience an adrenalin rush, then all of your abilities, skills, and imagination will be wasted. They’ll never see the light of day. You’ll be just going through the motions. Without putting your heart into what you do, nothing else matters. Your mind will follow your heart.

If your first nursing job isn’t exactly what you expected and you don’t enjoy it, find another job, in another specialty, in another unit, in another hospital, in another clinic. Make whatever job adjustments you need until you feel that spark of excitement.

3. ***Be resilient and persevere in spite of failure.*** It may be ridiculous and even inappropriate to mention the word failure at an occasion such as this. But it’s part of the real world. It can affect our professional as well as our personal lives. Failure manifests itself in so many forms: rejection, disappointment, defeat, and even being devalued by people you value. Failure occurs for one of two reasons: either (1) because of something we did based on choices we made or (2) because of circumstances beyond our control. So the issue is not whether we will

experience failure or rejection, but rather how we will respond to it when it happens.

A few years ago a study was conducted of CEOs of *Fortune 500* companies to identify the characteristics of these leaders – what sets them apart from other leaders? Among the different characteristics that emerged, the one common thread running through all of these CEOs was their ability to overcome failure in their businesses, to bounce back from any setback.

If you don't get the job you want, the apartment or house you want, the roommate you want, the significant other you want, turn that disappointment into something positive. See it as an opportunity to do something different or find somebody different. Try to embrace that change, as difficult as it may seem at the time.

4. ***Be humble in all of your relationships, especially those with your colleagues and patients.*** Self-promotion permeates our culture. You have observed people who are addicted to their own significance and accomplishments. It's a disease. You know what it feels like when someone talks to you with a boastful or arrogant spirit.

I suggest that you consider the other extreme of this continuum – total humility. Please do not use your Hopkins diploma as a club to smack people over their heads or upside their heads. That's not what you're supposed to do with your credentials. Instead, let your actions, behaviors, and performance speak for your outstanding abilities, knowledge, and skills that you gained from our program as well as your compassion, caring spirit, patience, sense of humor, and

all of your other attributes. Your colleagues will take notice and so will your patients. As you leave a patient's room, that patient will sit up, enduring whatever pain is necessary, to say, "Who was that masked person?"

A long time ago, someone once said, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourself." That's the standard we all need to set for ourselves.

5. ***Never compromise your integrity.*** You don't have to be the CEO of Enron, who, by the way, was not one of the CEOs in the previous study, or a reporter for the *New York Times* to lose your integrity and the trust of everyone around you. In your new job, set the highest standards for your own conduct. The rule of thumb seems rather simple: *Just do the right thing.* Today, however, based on the way some people behave, you can distinguish yourself by just doing the right thing.

Please consider those five factors in your new career as a nurse. You should aspire to inspire everyone with whom you come in contact. You inspired me this past semester to do things in my biostatistics class that I have never done before. The result: some incredible memories we now have in our rear view mirror.

However, in the next few days after the celebrations come to an end, you need to refocus and concentrate on filling your windshield. I wish you the absolute best in realizing your amazing potential and dreams in that windshield.

It was one of my greatest joys to work with you in all of our classes together and again a privilege that you gave me to deliver this message here today. I will miss you very much.

