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2000 Commencement Address

G. Timothy Johnson, M.D., medical editor, ABC News



Bishop Reilly, President Vellaccio, members of the board, honored guests, members of the circle of family and friends that surround you, and most importantly, honored graduates of the first class of this millennium. I am very honored to have been asked to be your commencement speaker today, and in response to that honor, I would like to begin with some good news: I will be done in less than 10 minutes, and you can mark that promise on your watch if you wish.

Obviously today is a milestone in the development in the skills of your mind. You have spent the past four years on this campus honing those skills - skills of logic and thoughtfulness, and balance and judgment. And I certainly am not here today to disparage those skills in any way. As a scientist, I honor them, and I will tell you that they will save you from making some bad mistakes, and they will help you make decisions.

But I am here today to tell you that if you use, in your future lives, only those skills, you will miss out on some wonderful opportunities to make choices that will bring you joy and opportunities for service. That if you listen only to the habits of your mind and ignore the murmurs of your heart, you will miss opportunities. I could talk about this and verbalize it, but I am going to instead tell you two stories from the life I know best - which is of course my own - in hopes that they will inspire you to listen to your own hearts.

In the summer of 1968, between my junior and senior years in medical school, my wife, who was a nurse, and I had the wonderful opportunity of working in a little missionary hospital for four months on the northernmost tip of Indonesia. While we were there, a little 18-month-old boy was abandoned on the front steps of our modest little hospital. And I got to know him immediately because he had some medical problems and was put in our pediatric ward, which really meant a board on a cement floor. And I would play with him everyday while making rounds.

One night we were going off to a birthday party for one of the Indonesian nurses and, on impulse, I picked him up and brought him along to the party. After the party, my wife said, "why don't we bring him back to our little room and give him a bath, since he's without clothes and a little bit dirty and needs a little attention." So we did. We brought him back to our little single room and bathed him and went down to the only store in the village and bought him a little pair of pants and a pair of shoes and played with him that night. And when it was time to bring him back to the hospital I said, "why don't we keep him overnight, and I'll bring him back in the morning when I go to work."

And that morning we sat at the breakfast table and looked at each other and we knew, in our hearts, that he was ours. And we made the instant decision to adopt him. Now if we had listened only to the habits of our mind, we would have known that we were in no position to start a family - we had no money, I had years of training ahead, etc., etc. But we were open - thank God - in that moment to the voice of God in our hearts. We brought him back with us, and today he's 33 years old - a wonderful young man, a furniture designer - and in December, he and his lovely wife will present us with our first grandchild.

Now, I want to tell you a second story. Just a few weeks before I was to graduate from medical school, in the spring of 1969, I went down to the student lounge to watch the evening news. It happened that on that particular newscast was a report from Chicago where that day the AMA (the American Medical Association) had carried a report about the AMA's opposition to the proposed appointment of a Dr. John Knowles, then head of the Mass General Hospital in Boston, to become the under secretary of health.

They opposed his appointment because he was advocating universal health care, and they were very opposed to that policy. Had the AMA held auditions to select the most inept trustee to present their cause to the television cameras, they could not have done better than the ancient trustee who read from a prepared speech and then, when questioned by the press, quickly discombobulated into incoherence so badly that when they came back to the hosts of the news program, David Brinkley and Chet Huntley, they were laughing so hard that they had to go to a commercial break to regain their composure.

The very next morning, in my mailbox, by obviously pure coincidence, was a form letter from the AMA inviting me to join, as an about-to-be new doctor. And once again, on sheer impulse, I wrote on the form letter that if what I had heard on the evening news the night before was indication of their policy - being opposed to universal health care - I had no interest in joining the organization. I dropped it in the mailbox, never expecting to hear another word. To my utter astonishment, three weeks later, I got a long personal letter from the head of the AMA, further outlining their opposition to Dr. Knowles.

At this point, I was into it, so I sent the letter off to Dr. Knowles, whom I had never met, asking for his response. He was very interested in what they were saying, wrote me a long letter, and said that if I ever came to Boston to look him up. I ended up as a physician in Boston several years later, looked him up, and we became good friends. It was at the time when he was participating with a group of Boston and Harvard citizens in taking over the operation of the ABC station in Boston, and because of our friendship, he asked if I would consider hosting a half-hour program in the morning, before I went to the hospital, on health matters for the public. I agreed to do so, and that's how I got involved in what has turned out to be a wonderful and stimulating and fulfilling career. But had I not responded to that outrage I felt in my heart, that never would have happened.

Now, I know that every single one of you is sitting this morning, thinking about your future. You are spinning out a blueprint in your mind, and, what I want to urge you to do, what I want to beg you to do, is to leave some open spaces in that blueprint marked "TBA" - to be announced, because I guarantee you that there will be opportunities, crossroads which will come your way that you cannot begin to imagine as you sit here this morning. And when they do, please, listen to your heart because it is the voice of God. Thank you for listening.