



## COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS, 2011

DEAN DENNIS S. CHARNEY, MD

MOUNT SINAI  
SCHOOL OF  
MEDICINE

### A Day of Remembrance, Thankfulness, Celebration, and Anticipation

Honorary degree recipients, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, alumni of the Class of 1986, parents and friends, and most importantly, the graduating Class of 2011 . . . Welcome to the Forty-Second Commencement of Mount Sinai School of Medicine!

This is a day of remembrance, thankfulness, celebration, and anticipation. Let's have a moment of silent thanks for those loved ones of our graduates who are no longer with us.

Hillary Clinton wrote, "It takes a village," and Bruce Springsteen says, "It takes a band," (my friends know I had to have a Bruce reference). The message is the same: You can't get there by yourself!

Therefore, please show your appreciation, with thunderous applause, for the family and friends upon whose shoulders our graduates stood to get to where they are today.

We celebrate the accomplishments of the Class of 2011. They have received national awards for leadership, community service, academic excellence, and research—published research papers in top scientific journals . . . did 28,312 hours of community service . . . and studied much, much more than that . . .

You have before you the future leaders of clinical medicine and biomedical research!

Graduates, in a few minutes, you will complete your tenure as students at Mount Sinai School of Medicine and embark on a future of wonderful possibilities. The divine wisdom that came down from the Mountain, Mount Sinai, has reverberated through generations.

While my advice will not be so profound, and comes not from a higher power, but from your medical school, I do hope to provide you a roadmap . . . a six-part prescription, if you will, toward a career of self-fulfillment, happiness, and success.

**Be altruistic:** Giving back to others will make you emotionally stronger. I am certain that you—as future doctors who have already helped so many patients—realize that on an individual level.

But altruism is much more powerful than one person's feel-good moment. A terrific book, *The Price of Altruism* by Oren Harman, explores the more complex and sometimes counter-intuitive notion that altruism also plays a fundamental role in evolution—a theory that is often described in fighting terms like "survival of the fittest." Indeed, evolutionary science supports the hypothesis that altruism is intrinsic to our nature and benefits not only the individual, but also our communities, and human society in general.

This idea is crystal clear in my favorite movie, *It's A Wonderful Life*, by Frank Capra. In it, George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart) finds out that if he had never lived, the lives of the citizens of Bedford Falls would have been substantially worse. Upon this realization, his brother, Harry Bailey, proclaimed him "the richest man in town."

Graduates, pay forward your good fortune and help those in need, and you too will be the richest person in your town.

**Seek out role models and help them:** Randy Pausch, the Carnegie Mellon computer scientist who delivered his famous "Last Lecture" while dying from pancreatic cancer, said he was able to achieve his dreams because of his parents, mentors, friends, colleagues, and students. Cherish these relationships. I know how important this is – I still ask my mentors, former students, and friends for advice—among them, my best friend of 30 years, Ken Davis. It is very special and deeply rewarding to be his colleague.

**Dare to be revolutionary . . . and accept failure:** Biomedical research is in crisis. The number of new drugs approved by the FDA with improved efficacy is at its lowest point in decades. I could go on . . . but will jump to the chase: This calls for a revolution!

Thomas Kuhn, in his seminal book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, noted that when a prevailing paradigm fails to make productive predictions, then the difficulty may lie with the paradigm itself . . . the very foundation on which the research is based . . . The transition from an old paradigm in crisis to a new one requires extraordinary science by courageous investigators.

This is what our field needs right now!

For example, discoveries in genomics facilitated by routine, affordable sequencing of the human genome promises to usher in a new era in the understanding of human biology, and this will lead to better ways of predicting, preventing, and treating human disease.

Graduates, as the next generation of scientists and clinicians, you must be in the vanguard of such an historic transformation in biomedical research and clinical practice.

Do not fear failure in this endeavor because high achievement and failure go hand in hand.

Take it from Michael Jordan: "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career, I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty six times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over in my life. And that's why I succeed!"

**Maintain optimism:** As physicians and scientists, every one of you will face tough times that will test your mettle. It is during these defining moments that a strong sense of self-respect, moral purpose, and effective control of your emotions will give you the optimism and resilience you need to prevail.

I recommend you consider the accomplishments of Admiral James Stockdale who was the senior naval Vietnam POW held in the Hanoi prison for eight years. He was tortured 15 times, put in leg irons for two years, and placed in solitary confinement for four years – yet he prevailed. For his heroism during this ordeal, he was awarded the Medal of Honor. He credited his resilience and survival to the moral teachings of the Greek sage and stoic philosopher, Epictetus.

His teachings are described in the *Enchiridion*. Though first published over 2,000 years ago, this short handbook, is a wonderful guide for dealing with the hardships and disappointments of daily life.

**Lead and build great groups:** So, you are going to be clinical and research leaders. Warren Bennis in *Organizing Genius: The Secret of Creative Collaboration* concluded that great deeds throughout history were accomplished by innovative leaders in a fertile relationship with a great group.

Typically it's a small group of committed people who have a sense of meaning, of spirit, and undaunted optimism that they could do something that no one else has ever done. Great groups generated incredible advancements such as nuclear energy, the microchip, and the Internet.

You the Class of 2011, seek to become leaders of inspiring force, the curator of the dreams of others.

**Provide moral leadership:** Robert Coles in his book, *Lives of Moral Leadership*, wrote, "Each of us plays a role in the moral drama of the world around us." As physicians and scientists you need to act on your beliefs, stand up for what is right, spur others on to purposeful action – and from time to time, you will have the opportunity for heroic action, either in a small, day-to-day way, or on the larger world stage.

In America and in the rest of the world, we are going to need your moral leadership to ensure that the poor and the disenfranchised get the medical care they need.

Many years ago, my wife and lifelong friend wrote me a message on the occasion of my high school graduation. Those words have inspired me ever since.

*With Candle in Hand,  
Imagination in Your Mind,  
and Courage in Your Heart,  
Follow your dreams,  
I will be beside you.*

Class of 2011, we hope the lessons learned at Mount Sinai stay with you always.

You can be assured your school, your teachers, will be beside you – as you follow your dreams.