

LIFE IS ALWAYS A GREAT JOURNEY
Dr. Bert Mandelbaum
Cortland Commencement Speech 2009

Good afternoon all: Students, parents and loved ones. Faculty, President Bitterbaum, and General Dunwoody. Cortland--thank you, for the foundation and cornerstones. SUNY-- thank you for this degree.

I am truly humbled by this honor.

Now graduates please stand up. Family and friends, Let's give the 2009 graduates a warm round of applause... This is your day...

Congratulations graduates on your accomplishments! It truly is a great day to be alive! It is great for me to come back home...

Today I accept the opportunity to speak ...and the responsibility to be heard....

.... With the hope that it will resonate in each of you tomorrow...

It was a typical Tuesday afternoon in January as I was busily seeing patients in the clinic as my cell rang ...I answered.... Hello this is President Bitterbaum from Cortland...he then asked if I was sitting..... there was a silence and sinking feeling come over me...yes my and our worst nightmare was unfolding... as I excused my self from the room and immediately sat down... busted!!!...

What did I do?

Did I forget to drop that psych 404 on time,
Did I flunk that very last paper for Dr. Batzing?
or perhaps it was that I did not pay my parking tickets...

As I pondered, the next words were..... congratulations you have been selected for a great honor... and here I am

As I see it Life is always a great journey...with many highs, regressions and failures...there is no destination

As we listened to our favorite war time hero Forest Gump..... **“my momma always said, that life is like a box of chocolates..... you never know whatch ya gonna get!!!!!!”**

Graduation day 1975, just like you sitting in those chairs ...excitement, fear, elation.... I reflected...what was next...

I had four great years as bio major, mentored by fantastic teachers-- Batzings, Mason, Waldbauer, Reynolds and others who shaped my mind and my passion for the environment, and for learning and leading. I'd worked hard toward my dream of becoming a doctor. I'd also played lacrosse, and being that it's Cortland-- I'd had a lot of fun too the hill back at for the at 2 am can be awfully cold...

Diploma awarded. Pictures taken. Dinner at The Hollywood. Parties around town. Hugs, kisses, goodbyes, good luck. Pack up--Rt. 13 out of town. But where to?

No destination. No concrete plan.

One minor obstacle stood between me and the future: I had not been accepted into Medical school. Ok, let me phrase it a little more bluntly: I had been rejected. Turned down. Dismissed as a viable candidate-- by every single medical school I'd applied to—

Indeed, it is a journey—from then to now.

A few snapshots from the journey. That graduation day in 1975:

-- I didn't yet know that I'd come to realize that optimism, and having a dream and being passionate about what you do, is far more significant than the disappointments and obstacles that appear in the way of it. And that adversity can, in fact, become the engine of unimagined opportunities.

-- I didn't know that I was going to end up as an Orthopedic Surgery Resident at Johns Hopkins, especially since they'd rejected me from the medical school—not once, but twice!!!—a story I will tell more about.

-- I didn't know that I'd be a US National team Soccer team physician, where I'd get to travel to 52 countries in 18 years!

--I didn't know that I'd be in Moscow during the Soviet Coup in August 1991, after a match, witnessing history--the coup de grace of Peristroika and the fall of the communist machine. Upon return, President Regan under my care for a shoulder injury, engaged me and I him..... Mr. President how did you do it?

Well I knew the first nite we met....outside of Geneva that Mr. Gorbachev and I had exactly the same ideas! Take down the wall.

--or that I'd be having a grand feast in King Fahd 's chambers in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia after the Persian Gulf war

--or traveling across the world after 9-11, representing the USA in World Cup 2002 and all those mixed explosive feelings and fears.

--Or at the Olympics in Greece 2004, as FIFA Medical officer my job was to oversee the Iraqi team..... and that night—after their team's semifinal win... we drove back—while at war--5 Iraqi's, and one American doctor, as we sang and laughed...and celebrated life. What an Olympic moment.

-- In 1975, I didn't know that in my work and travels that I'd witness again and again that the human being everywhere is the same regardless of race, ethnicity, and place of birth or residence. The smiles the laughs the cries... the disappointments are always the same. Through the Olympics, sports and medicine we understand and stress these similarities and understand better how to celebrate and embrace the differences!

Ok—so, the day I left Cortland, I had a couple of things going for me-- a degree in Biology. I knew how to handle a lacrosse stick. I had a car.

I went to visit my friends in Baltimore-- Fellow Red Dragons Mitch and Marianne Wolf who were in programs at Johns Hopkins. It was not accidental that of all my friends who'd scattered, they were the ones I went to visit. Hopkins was the place for medicine and for lacrosse.

You see by putting myself in the center where lacrosse and medicine happens, I made myself available to the opportunities that might arise Intuition, openness to discovery, led to amazing coincidences.

That week a spot opened in a graduate program at Hopkins that came with a NIH fellowship. I also fell into a position coaching lacrosse at Hopkins as Head coach of the B team.

For the next two years, I coached lacrosse, I studied hard, And again- - applied to Johns Hopkins medical school—. Dr. Jones, the director of admissions at Hopkins Barked at me “why should we accept you?” We reject 4.0s from Harvard, why accept you! “ Again—a rejection. Embarrassed and hurt.

But this time-- I was accepted to all the schools I’d applied to other than Hopkins!! Confronted with decisions, my mentor, Noble Laureate Dan Nathans pointed me to his alma mater Washington University in St. Louis but because of my work at Hopkins, I was offered a 2nd year spot ...what a twist of fate... rejection to skipping a year!

The lure of a Hopkins Residency brought me back to Baltimore! I visited Dr. Jones, as he bragged “of one of Hopkins finest coming back home!! “ I guess it is always about attitude! Not aptitude!

The Hopkins Residency was like training as a Navy seal or fighter pilot, Hard work was an understatement! I quickly transformed into the trained officer ready for any mission any time or place!

Sports, Medicine and Surgery was now my whole life and the train was on the track. Off to UCLA for a fellowship, as the journey continued.

In Los Angeles, I truly had gone to the Disneyland of Sports...and was exposed to the best athletes in the world. My world became college and professional sports, Olympics and World Cups. There I was inspired by UCLA coaching legend, John Wooden as he indoctrinated me to his “pyramid of success” paradigm. And I embraced it... it changed me and everything I do and have done.

Some reflections from that time.

--In 1987 tragedy struck Olympic Gold medalist and now NBC announcer Tim Daggett as he fell from the vault in Rotterdam resulting in a horrible leg fracture that I repaired. No one thought that he could ever compete let alone work his way to the Olympic trials just 7 months later falling short by 1 pt to make the team... boy did he teach me and the world.... the concept of “daring to dream”.

About the same time--A 15 year old boy Cliff Meidl was electrocuted and became my patient. He lost much of both legs, requiring me to perform 14 surgeries to get him to walk ...he rose from the depths of injury in 1987 to train as a competitive kayaker making the Olympic team. At the opening ceremonies in Sidney year 2000, I watched with astonishment as he limped and carried the American flag for the US Olympic team! What a tear crunching moment!

---I learned that the passion for academics is of the heart and mind. I focused on research in areas where the crowd wasn't. I learned to ask and answer questions... I synergistically partnered with peers, organizations, governments all over the globe-- whoever I could find to be part of our team, making solid innovations here and beyond our borders.

---and Bruce Arena. He was a stiff lacrosse rival during my Cortland days, and a Cornell all American and our nemesis in the 70's who killed us on the field next door...he was so tough he would run us over then step on us with pride...25 years later, summer of 1998 he was named US Men's National Soccer Team coach... unbelievable different sport-- he as coach, me as doc. We had 8 great years until he was fired after World Cup 2006... then hired in New York, then fired and guess what? In 2008 hired to work with the LA Galaxy. He the coach, me the doc. We are back together as a team far from Cortland lacrosse field in 1973! 36 years later.

Fellow graduates... We are facing a changing and changed world. But I still say that this is your journey, and dare to dream.

Tom Friedman tells us that the world has become “flat, hot and crowded” ... evolving to Twitter, Face Book, Kindle, Google, iphone, You tube all of which have changed the landscape.

Amid stimulus packages, the economy has failed us, but out of challenge and despair ... we will become whole again, through bold and swift response.

And I still say—find your place, your opportunity--this is your journey, and the only constant in this life is change.....and this is a robust one!

And so—from here to there, and back again-- I leave you with my personal top 10.

10. Find your dream. In the days and weeks ahead spend this introspective time to develop the process of what and who you are... Make it your priority to identify and focus on your strengths fine tuning your confidence. ...then proceed with anticipation not entitlement or expectation.

9. The Olympic Spirit is Within: John Wooden always said be the best that you are capable of becoming... Olympic spirit is with in all of us... For Tim Daggett and Cliff Meidl, it is daring to dream. ...Superheroes have that special quality to overcome the ladder of challenge – goal achievement and success... despite what appears to be insurmountable odds

8. Create rich experiences: That’s always a priority over experiences that you think can make your rich. Live with humility, volunteerism and passion for the unfortunate. It always comes back.

7. Location, Location, Location: Find the right time...Locate and surround yourself with potential opportunities...wherever you are. Anticipate the window through prepared pathways then execute your plan..... ..

6. Hard work...works! As a rule....I have learned that working really hard is what really successful people do!

5..Always find a mentor...

For you and for me... there is always someone who can provide wisdom, experience, influence, and comfort when you don't know the answer

4. Be optimistic at all times...

I have always led and followed with optimism. It will help you and others find your way ...even when the path is not in front of you! Bad experiences, can make good judgments. And sometimes a door you never imagined will open.

3. Fitness is our only fountain of youth. I wake up everyday and run, it defines me...It is a state of mind that will optimize your mood, keep you sharp even on the darkest of days!

2 .Character Counts. Everything you say and do matters to someone sometime. Do the right thing 100 % of the time. In the words of Lincoln..."Your reputation, word and honor is the most important possession you own"

1. Relationships are the Jewels of Life. . Remember the concept of TEAM Together , Everyone Achieves More....!

Think as "WE" ... not as "I" in all that we do.

In work... lead with the concepts of Trust, Stability, compassion and hopeDevelop , build and protect relationships... Success is relationships in evolution over time.

The ultimate relationships are your family and friends celebrate them, cherish them and keep them....never compromise the integrity for anything at anytime.

Thank you to my loving and patient wife and partner of 20 years Ruth--She has given me context, depth and meaning, and my great children Rachel, Jordan and Ava and therefore success.

Thank you to my parents Al and Florence, brother and sister, inlaws and. Now that is the ultimate equity!

I am thankful to many people my team, my partners, my mentors, my patients, my peers, my institutions, my societies and colleagues, sponsors and friends.

Cortland thank you for the foundation and cornerstones

SUNY Thank you for this opportunity... I am humbled by this honor.

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Remember that Life is a great journey...with many stops, regressions and failures...it is never a destination. seize the day...seize this day.. make it your own masterpiece!

I will leave you with Jimmy Buffett's song, "oysters and pearls"...

Some people love to lead
Some refuse to dance
Some people play it safely
Others take a chance

Still, it's all a mystery
This place we call the world
Where most live as oysters
While some become pearls

God Bless you and thank you Cortland!