

Pieces of Eight

Fall, 1996, Commencement Address

Graduates: I envy you! You have learned things that I do not know, and you face a future brimming with promise. I congratulate you, your parents, and your teachers on completing your course of study at this great University. You are our new artists, our new nurses, our new scientists, our new leaders. We entrust our world to you.

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Our generation has seen more change than any generation since the dawn of civilization. And your generation will see even more. You will be challenged by change. A change that continues to astound us, a change that alters our daily lives Accordingly, it is proper to focus this address on how to meet that change, how to thrive with change, even if the change comes ever faster and faster—and I promise you that it will continue to come with the roar of hurricane that will make Bertha and Fran seem tame.

By Walter J. Pories Professor of Surgery and Biochemistry, School of Medicine

and that the obstetrician on duty, a native doctor, was about to perform a Caesarean section to save the child. I watched him do this wonderful operation—the one that I had not seen for such a long time. I found myself watching intently—where he made the incision, how he entered the uterus, how he grasped the baby, how he managed the placenta.

The next night I was awakened at 4 A.M. by a young native who yelled that I had to come at once to the operating suite to deliver a baby. There was trouble. I told him that he needed to find the obstetrician. He replied in a rapid pidgin English that the obstetrician had gone to be with his family in the bush. There was no other doctor there. It was my job. I dressed quickly and within minutes was repeating the scene I had witnessed 24 hours earlier; only this time, it was my responsibility. Smoothly, we repeated the miracle of the day before, and soon both mother and her baby were doing fine. The lesson from that story is simple: listen to your inner voice. It can be an awful nuisance, but it is your best friend. Some say that it's like a little wheel with very sharp points spinning about in your head. If you pay attention, it stays sharp, but if you don't, if you ignore its warning, it soon dulls and then, pretty soon, the inner voice becomes dumb and anything goes. It is your conscience, and your most reliable guide. Listen to it.

thing to get him to the mother, including stripping him down to his skivvies, but he still couldn't get through that narrow trailer door. Finally, they resolved the problem by setting up a tent out in the yard, bringing the mother out into the tent, and there the baby was successfully delivered. The point of that story is that when Charles Rob returned to England several years ago to talk about old times, the villagers did not recount the horrors of the Second World War. They were, instead, still shaking their heads about fat Uncle Mitchell and that delivery

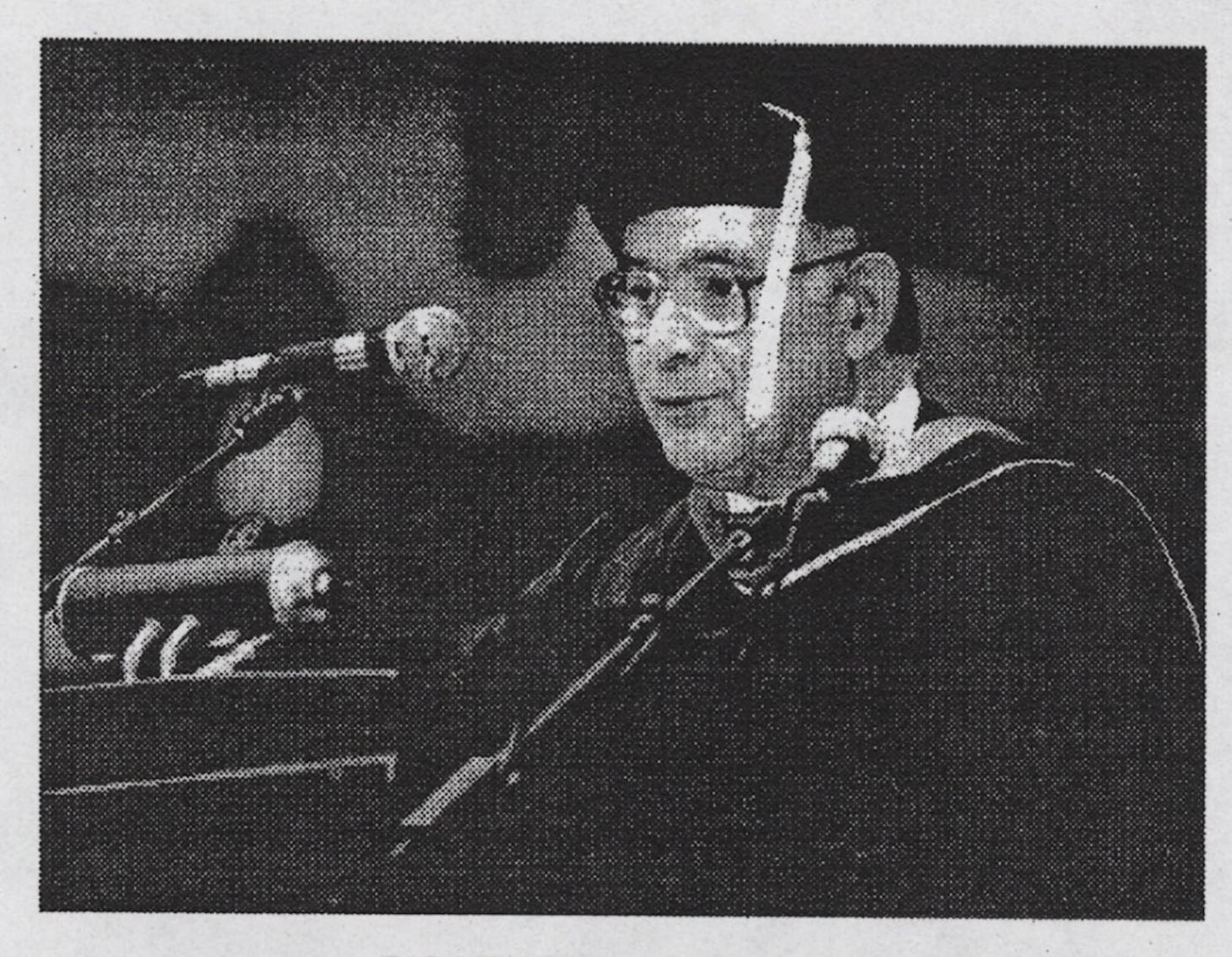
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If you are to survive and succeed in change, you must maintain a set of principles, a set of values that don't change, that are immutable even when the rest of the things around you change a great deal.

I have three principles that have guided and helped me through turbulent times. Let me pass those on to you in the hopes that they will help.

The first principle is to listen to the inner voice. Deep inside, each of us has a sense of what is right, a sense of intuition; perhaps we could call it the inner voice. We all have that inner voice. Be still and listen, and your inner voice will guide you. You may not always like it or find it convenient, but it can be your compass and your best friend. Let me tell you a story about that.

About a year ago, I went to Kenya in Africa to serve as a missionary surgeon. The area around the Tenwek Hospital was beautiful and mountainous, filled with tea plantations. It was, however, also filled with awful malnutrition and the worst poverty I had ever seen. Almost all of the patients I saw were illiterate. Very few children attended school at all. Almost half our patients had AIDS. Believe me, it was quite different from practicing in Pitt County Memorial Hospital. I came to Kenya to do surgery. But after I had been at the hospital for about three weeks, I suddenly got this inexplicable urge to watch a Caesarean section. You know that Caesarian section is an operation, often performed as an emergency, in which a baby is delivered through an incision in the mother's abdomen. It is an operation that I had not even watched for at least 30 years. I thought it was a silly feeling that had come over me.



over 45 years ago. Folks remember.

Roberto Alomar is another example of that rule. That 28-year-old second basemon of the Baltimore Orioles was one of the favorite superstars of baseball. A .294 batting average, a super fielder. A superb record as one of baseball's few heroes—until that one fateful day when he spit into the face of umpire John Hirshbeck. One failure. One action of uncontrolled anger has turned him from hero to goat. Nobody will ever forget that failure. Never. Even though he has now apologized publicly, given \$50,000 for research on the disease afflicting the umpire's son, no one will forget his lapse.

Be careful of your actions. Don't throw tantrums; don't be a rogue elephant; be careful of what you do.

The last principle I would speak about is the very important one of staying in the present moment and appreciating each day. Rejoice in the present. It is not a new philosophy. Chinese philosophers knew this thousands of years ago.

Let me illustrate this focus on the present with a final story, a sad one, because it deals with a personal friend of mine on this faculty, Dr. Maria O'Neil, who was the Dean of our School of Social Work. As many of you know, she recently passed away. A few months ago, shortly after she was diagnosed with incurable cancer, she wrote a letter to her faculty and student colleagues. This moving letter describes the fact that she and her husband Dennis are "in shock," saying that, "My diagnosis is very serious, stage four, in the lungs, lymph nodes, and liver." Then she says, in a voice filled with the clarity of one's final moments:

Remember, I'm a surgeon and in the U.S., surgeons don't deliver babies ... as that cute little girl said in *Gone With the Wind*, "I don't know nothin' about birthin' babies." I had not done obstetrics in years.

Nevertheless, my inner voice was strong and insistent. I have learned to listen to that voice; it has helped me save lives, a curious instinct. So I left my ward, walked to the other section of the hospital, and found, to my surprise, that a mother was in trouble

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The second principle that has helped me get through things is simply this: Be careful what you do; folks remember. Be very careful about what you do because it will follow you. People will remember. Abraham Lincoln said, "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We will be remembered in spite of ourselves."

Let me tell you a story about people remembering. This story is not my own; it was told to me by my own mentor, Dr. Charles Rob, a world-famous surgeon who was my teacher and who retired from our faculty several years ago.

Charles Rob had an uncle, Mitchell Rob, who was a family physician in northern England during the Second World War, a fine physician but one who was very, very fat! Now Uncle Mitchell had a patient who lived in a trailer. When the call came to deliver her baby at home, Uncle Mitchell was unable to get into the trailer because he was so fat. The villagers tried everyLooking back I see so much I wanted to finish. Looking ahead, I think of the plans Denny and I were making. Now I know I can only look to the present, what is here—and I am grateful. Days that I feel well are treasures. I can focus, listen, and laugh. These are "gift days" and rightly called "the present." Our process of becoming is unfolding in mysterious and surprising ways. Through the darkness a new day is awakening. Let us be glad and rejoice in it.

So there you have it: Listen to your inner voice. Be careful of your actions because folks will long remember what you do. And finally, rejoice in each day, especially this wonderful day.

You have our congratulations, our love, our best wishes. Thank you for the honor of addressing you and good luck to all of you.

East Carolina University