



Dr. Abigail Caudle '92
2017 Commencement Remarks
June 2, 2017

Congratulations! This is such an exciting day for you and your families! I want to thank Dr. C and the Board of Trustees for the honor of inviting me to be part of this celebration.

And I want to thank the weather and United Airlines for cooperating this year.

In preparing for this speech, I really did not know where to start. I searched websites that listed the 10 best commencement speeches ever, books titled "10 ½ Things No Commencement Speaker has Ever Said," YouTube videos of celebrities giving their remarks. I researched speeches given by George Bush, Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, Toni Morrison.

I thought back to many graduations that I have attended for myself, my siblings, my friends – graduations from PDS, colleges, med school. I realized that I could name a few, but not all of the speakers that I have heard, but I could not remember a single thing that they said. Which was a great relief to me. Even if I screw this up, you won't remember it anyway.

But what a shame, I'm sure they had some really helpful, insightful points – I just wish I could remember them.

So I thought that maybe a learning tool would help – like a mnemonic. Like using Roy G Biv to remember the colors of the rainbow, HOMES for the Great Lakes, or learning the ABCs for CPR.

But I still had to find something to say...so that you could remember it. What did I want say in the 10 minutes that stand between you and your diploma? Should we talk about world peace, saving the environment, the role of technology in the global economy?

I have a habit, or maybe an obsession, with reading books that will make me more productive. How to manage email, how to get things done, etc. All full of tricks to help me today, tomorrow, and next week. So I decided to give you my advice for handling the next years of your life. My HACKs for life after Providence Day, if you will..

H – be Happy. We know happiness is important – how often have you heard “I just want you to be happy?” But what does it mean? Being happy doesn’t always mean having fun. Happiness doesn’t mean being rich or famous – a quick glance through US Weekly or TMZ will show you that.

There’s a Chinese proverb that I think is pretty spot-on: *Happiness is someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to.* Often, true happiness requires time, hard work, even sacrifice to achieve it.

Some people may tell you that these are the happiest times of your life. I hope not.

Toni Morrison once said:

“If these are the best years of your life, you do have my condolences because there is nothing more satisfying, more gratifying than true adulthood. The adulthood that is the span of life before you. The process of becoming one is not inevitable. Its achievement is a difficult beauty, an intensely hard won glory.”

It’s a balance of all the key parts of your life – your health, your relationships, your career, your aspirations.

Let me tell you about a time that I chose happiness and it made all the difference. To be a surgeon, you have to do a five-year residency after your four years of medical school – you can add on extra years of a fellowship if you decide to specialize. Often these fellowships are competitive, so residents who are interested in a fellowship often add another two years during the middle of residency to do research in a lab – it’s a resume booster.

When I was a resident, I was SURE that I wanted to be a general surgeon when I was all done. I was so sure of that that when it came time for us to decide who would take those lab spots, I dug my heels in and shook my head. Not me. No way. I had no interest in academic medicine, or research, or adding one extra day to my training. I had my head down, and I was counting the days off ‘til I was done. Free.

At the end of my 4th year – one year away from a real job – I started my cancer surgery rotation. I spent the first week of service having a ball. Interesting cases, discussions about how to treat the patient and the biology of their disease, working with all kinds of other doctors. I remember being in the OR on that Friday and realizing, almost with a tear in my eye, that I was ... happy.

I had been so determined to work hard, excel, but I had been missing...this. Wanting to go to work every day. Reading about cases when I got home because I wanted to not because I had to. Enjoying my day and not just slugging through it. I talked to my advisors about a surgical oncology fellowship but they said it was really impossible without adding two years in the lab to my resume.

I had missed the window for the traditional lab spots, so my only recourse was to do my two years AFTER I finished my residency. Yep – instead of getting a job, I would need to add five more years of training – two in the lab and three of fellowship. I had to do it.

Once I had glimpsed the possibility of happiness, it seemed like a fair investment. My co-residents thought I was crazy; my mom thought I was crazy. But it was the best decision of my life – all because I decided to get out of the race and start a journey.

If you look at life as a race- success is defined as how you stacked up to the people around you. Did you get the end faster? The only person that is happy is the one who wins the race...and then only until the next race.

But a journey involves being happy with where you are in the moment and where you are going...regardless of the people racing around you. Those two years allowed me to get a fellowship that eventually led to a job and a life that far exceeds what I could ever dreamed of along the way. Never be afraid to choose happiness. No matter what the price, it will always be worth it.

So on to A – **be Adaptable.**

It's amazing how much the world has changed in your lifetime. In 2000, the government made GPS available to the public – have any of you ever used a paper map to plan a trip? The first camera phone came out in 2002. The iPod came out in 2001 followed by iTunes in 2003, and the first iPhone in 2007 – can you believe less than 10 years ago? You've seen the advent of Google, the Prius, Wikipedia, and social media. You've also lived through world changes like those that happened after 9/11, the introduction of the Euro, Ebola epidemics, and the end of the Space shuttle program. The world is changing at a faster pace than ever before, and guess what? It's going to continue to change.

To be successful, you have to be flexible – always learning, always aware of new opportunities. In a few months, you will have to adapt to a new life in college – you'll have to adapt to not having a car available, having a roommate, sharing a bathroom with 50 of your closest dorm mates, to being in a class of 500 where the teacher has no idea that you exist.

Without a doubt, you will hit roadblocks and have failures along the way – you have to be adaptable in those situations as well. True success often comes out of how people respond to bad circumstances. Steve Jobs created Apple, then got fired. Instead of shrinking away, he started Pixar, which he describes as one of his great joys in life, and a company called NeXt, which was later bought by Apple, bringing Jobs back to the company with a renewal that launched it into what we know today.

Elon Musk, famous for creating Tesla cars did the same. Did you know that he was one of the original founders of Paypal, which was formed by merging his start-up with another one? Known as a true workaholic, he and his wife delayed their honeymoon for nine months so that he could get the company off the ground. They finally decided to use a work trip to Australia as a honeymoon, with plans to go to the Sydney Olympics. The Board of Directors decided to use this opportunity while he was on the airplane to meet and kick him out. When he got off the plane, he learned that he had been ousted and had to turn around and fly back. What did he do? He decided to focus on two other projects: space travel -- which led to the creation of SpaceX, and electric cars -- which resulted in Tesla.

How will you respond when the world changes under you? Will you let it defeat you or will you use that failure to launch into success?

We've got H and A, let's move on to C – **Choose wisely.**

One of the biggest differences about to happen is that you are going to have a lot of choices to make. I'm pretty sure that until now, most of you did not get to decide whether you went to class every day. You probably didn't get to choose when you came home at night, or what you had for dinner. That's about to change.

Your parents and teachers have spent all of these years instilling in you all of the building blocks for making wise choices in your life. But those choices aren't always big, most often they are day-to-day, minute-to-minute things. Are you going to study or go to a party? Are you going to turn off the alarm clock or go to your 8 am chemistry class? Are you going to eat vegetables or pizza...again.

You are about to get a clean slate, and a chance to start creating the person that you want to be. And that person is made by all of the choices you make every day.

You've all made a pretty big choice already – where you are going to spend the next phase of your life. Fifteen of you made the best choice possible – to join the Tarheel family at UNC. Four of you chose another college about 8 miles away in Durham – it's OK. You can still find success even if you're wearing the wrong shade of blue. You have made excellent choices about where your next journey will take you. Now remember that the choices that you make every day start building the life that you will lead.

And lastly K – **be Kind.** You are about to meet all kinds of people in college. Some of them will look different than you, speak another language, have entirely different experiences. They will have different religions, beliefs, and opinions. You may have to live with them in your dorm room or down the hall. You might have to rely on them to get a class project done. Make it a point to be kind – even if someone isn't like you. You will be amazed how the most unlikely relationships become important in your life.

And most importantly, be kind to your family. They love you. You are going to change and have a new life and experiences completely away from your family and PDS friends. You might feel like they don't understand you anymore, it might be hard to go home to rules when you've been living without them at school.

We sometimes feel that we can say anything to our family, because they will always love us. True. But because they love you so much and think so much of you, your unkind words will have an extra edge to them. Patty Griffin wrote a song called, "Long Black Car" about riding home from a loved one's funeral where she reflects: "Forty years of saying words I wished I hadn't said. How hard would it have been to say some nicer words instead." We never know how long we have our loved ones. Make sure you call your parents and tell them that you love them and appreciate them.

Brandi Carlile has a song that I love called "That Wasn't Me." The lyrics go like this:

"Tell me, did I go on a tangent?
Did I lie through my teeth?
Did I cause you to stumble on your feet?
Did I bring shame to my family?
Did it show when I was weak?
Whatever you've seen, that wasn't me.

Do I make myself a blessing to everyone I meet?
When you fall, will I get you on your feet?
Do I spend time with my family?
Did it show when I was weak?
When that's what you've seen, that will be me."

There you have it – My life HACKs – Be Happy, Be Adaptable, Choose wisely, and be Kind. If you happen to remember some of it when you are writing your own commencement speech in 25 years, send me an e-mail.

You should be very proud to be sitting here. Your list of colleges is dazzling, you have over \$10 million in scholarship offers, you've set a PDS record for National Merit Scholars, 22 of you have committed to playing sports in college, you have more stamps in your passports than most people get in their entire lives.

Thank your teachers, hug your parents, and know that you have put in the hard work to get here.

We're all so proud of you and excited about what's to come.

