



Graduation Perspective Joy

by Cassie Ferguson, MD – Pediatric Emergency
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I applied to 26 medical schools. Twenty-six. I was not accepted to any but was waitlisted at one.

And when I got the call from the MCW Office of Admissions in the summer of 2000, I packed up the few pieces of Ikea furniture I owned and bought actual paper maps of the states between California and Wisconsin. A week later, my sister and I hopped in my green Plymouth Breeze and took off for Milwaukee. And in the 20 years since that day, my life has changed in ways I could never have expected.

It is impossible to reflect on those two decades without remembering being an M3 falling asleep at 4:00 a.m. on the hard, tiled surgical ICU floor while my Trauma Service supervising intern prepared the all-important “list” for the day, the gross, yellow plastic couch where, as a resident, I would catch naps between pages in the middle of the pediatric ICU, the call rooms where I would pump breast milk for our first son which I would then hand off to my husband on his way home from work at 5:00 p.m., and the Christmases, Thanksgivings, and Fourth of July I spent away from my family, sneaking food from the nurses’ potlucks, and wandering the halls of the hospital.

Some would describe these as sacrifices – these hours we’ve spent within the walls of a hospital, or a clinic; these discomforts endured, these moments missed with our families.

And that is probably an accurate description. In the past twenty years, there has been sacrifice. There have been frustration and bitterness, loss and disappointment, fear and not-so-fleeting moments when I’ve asked myself “Why on earth did I sign up for this?”

But in and among every single one of those moments, there has been joy.

I have been thinking a lot about this emotion, “Joy.” I read a lot, typically very early in the morning before my family is awake. A few years ago, I rediscovered a book that has been sitting on my shelf for many years. **On Doctoring** is a collection of poems and essays that was given to every graduating medical student in the US by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. It was co-edited by the late poet and cardiologist, Dr. John Stone, and includes one of his best-known works, the poem *Gaudeamus Igitur*.

Gaudeamus Igitur, or “Let us Therefore Rejoice,” was also the common name given to a German commencement hymn that is still occasionally sung at university graduation ceremonies. The formal title of that song, *De Brevitate Vitae* or “On the Shortness of Life,” refers to an essay written by the Stoic Roman philosopher, Seneca the Younger in 49 AD.

The hymn encourages students to honor their professors and to cherish their days in university. It calls for them to make the most of their time, as they will quickly be overtaken by death. There are other, less appropriate verses incorporated when it’s sung while drinking.

Dr. Stone borrowed his poem’s form from *Jubilate Agno*, a work written by 18th century poet Christopher Smart while incarcerated in a mental asylum with only his cat, Jeoffrey, for companionship. In that 1200-line poem, Smart praised his cat’s relationship with God writing:

*“For he is the cleanest in the use of his forepaws of any quadruped.
For the dexterity of his defense is an instance of the love of God to him
exceedingly.”*

Dr. Stone fortunately did not write about cats, but rather used the same poetic form to tell the story of what it is to accept responsibility for the welfare of another human being. I had forgotten – or perhaps hadn’t appreciated – how perfectly he encapsulated how *joy finds us*, even in moments of grief or

loneliness or discomfort, particularly in the plain, unromantic moments of caring for people. He wrote it, fittingly, as a commencement address.

I've always loved graduations, which is good since I've had the opportunity to be in so many. Graduations themselves hold such an exuberant sense of joy and anticipation and relief and love. As I have watched some of the hundreds of makeshift graduation ceremonies posted on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter these past few weeks, those same emotions shone through – perhaps even more brightly. Parades of cars with graduates waving from sunroofs. Proud students in masks, caps, and gowns walking six feet apart down grocery store aisles. A checkerboard of smiling faces beaming over the internet during a Zoom ceremony. A band teacher playing every instrument for a homemade rendition of *Pomp and Circumstance*.

In the midst of what promises to be the most difficult and uncertain time period in our lifetime, it has been reassuring to see that joy still finds a way.

To our MCW graduates:

I will miss watching each of you walk proudly across the stage today. I will miss saying our last goodbyes, giving our last hugs. I could not be more proud to welcome each of you into our profession. May you acknowledge the sacrifices you've made and continue to make your ways with a sense of pride, gratitude, and humility. And most of all, may you find joy today and every day.

Congratulations, Class of 2020!

Reference: **On Doctoring: Stories, Poems, Essays**. Richard Reynolds, John Stone (eds.). Free Press. 2001.

Special Communications

Gaudeamus igitur

John Stone, MD

Gaudeamus igitur was delivered as the Valediction Address at Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, in July 1982. The Latin title is the first line of a medieval song that became, over the centuries, a drinking song, a song of celebration, in the universities of Europe. The Latin words of the first verse are these:

Gaudeamus igitur,	Post iucundam iuventutem,
Iuvenes dum sumus;	Post molestant senectutem,
Gaudeamus igitur,	Nos habebit humus,
Iuvenes dum sumus;	Nos habebit humus.

The verse translates, roughly: "Therefore let us rejoice/ While we are young/ After a delightful youth./ After an irksome old age./ The grave will contain us." The words and the tune to which they were sung have special significance for an academic occasion such as Commencement: Johannes Brahms, years later, incorporated the song into the climactic portion of his "Academic Festival Overture."

The form of the poem, in which every line begins with the word For, was suggested by a portion of the long poem, Jubilate Agno, written by the 18th-century poet Christopher Smart (1732-1771). The specific portion referred to was written by Smart in praise of his cat Jeoffrey.

For this is the day of joy
which has been fourteen hundred and sixty days in
coming
and fourteen hundred and fifty-nine nights
For today in the breathing name of Brahms
and the cat of Christopher Smart
through the unbroken line of language and all the
nouns
stored in the angular gyrus
today is a commencing
For this is the day you know too little
against the day when you will know too much
For you will be invincible
and vulnerable in the same breath
which is the breath of your patients
For their breath is our breathing and our reason
For the patient will know the answer
and you will ask him
ask her
For the family may know the answer
For there may be no answer
and you will know too little again
or there will be an answer and you will know too much
forever

From the Divisions of Cardiology and Emergency Medicine, Departments of Medicine and Community Health, Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta. Reprint requests to Emory University School of Medicine, 1440 Clifton Rd NE, Atlanta, GA 30322 (Dr Stone).

For you will look smart and feel ignorant
and the patient will not know which day it is for you
and you will pretend to be smart out of ignorance
For you must fear ignorance more than cyanosis
For whole days will move in the direction of rain
For you will cry and there will be no one to talk to
or no one but yourself
For you will be lonely
For you will be alone
For there is a difference
For there is no seriousness like joy
For there is no joy like seriousness
For the days will run together in gallops and the years
go by as fast as the speed of thought
which is faster than the speed of light
or Superman
or Superwoman
For you will not be Superman
For you will not be Superwoman
For you will not be Solomon
but you will be asked the question nevertheless*
For after you learn what to do, how and when to do it
the question will be *whether*
For there will be addictions: whiskey, tobacco, love
For they will be difficult to cure

*1 Kings 3:16-27

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Gaudeamus igitur—Stone 1741

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