



## *Graduation Perspective Joy*

by Cassie Ferguson, MD – Pediatric Emergency Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin

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 Fourths 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 1983. 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 molestam 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 (1722-1771). The specific portion referred to was written by Smart in praise of his cat *Jeffrey*.

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

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

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).

JAMA, April 1, 1983—Vol 249, No. 13

*Gaudeamus Igitur*—Stone 1741

\*1 Kings 3:16-27

Downloaded From: <https://jamanetwork.com/> Medical College of Wisconsin by Bruce Campbell on 05/19/2020

*Cassie Ferguson, MD is an Associate Professor of Pediatrics (Emergency Medicine) at MCW. She is Director of the Student Pillar of the Robert D. and Patricia E. Kern Institute for the Transformation of Medical Education.*

Return to *Transformational Times* by selecting the browser tab to the left  
at the top of your screen, or by using your browser's back arrow.