

Reflections on a Career in Medicine: Finding My Inner Gold Headed Cane

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The Gold Headed Cane is awarded to the graduating medical student at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine who embodies the qualities of the "true physician". In May, 2016, I donated the Gold Headed Cane that I received upon graduation 40 years ago to the 2016 recipient. As part of the Gold Headed Cane ceremony, I was asked to reflect on my career in medicine.

Good evening! I have always thought of the Gold Headed Cane (GHC) as a metaphor, a beacon of medical professionalism. Throughout my career, I have pursued that beacon by listening to my inner GHC.

My earliest years in training were too frequently distracted by a focus on self while learning to commit to patients. Anxiety and self-doubt were my unwelcome companions. As with many trainees, my self-worth fluctuated wildly during residency and fellowship, indeed, I felt like a medical impostor at times and a Master of the Medical Universe at others. My inner GHC pushed me to seek equanimity and patience in evaluating myself and others while reminding me of the primacy of patient welfare and to seize the opportunities for self-discovery and learning!

I have been blessed with a career of different roles in academic medicine, each of which has forced me to probe the limits of my own capacity, to come to grips with my limitations, and to acquire new skills. When I have fallen short of my expectations, my inner GHC implored me to recognize the privilege of being able to make a difference in the lives of others.

I am so grateful to have had a career in which I have been profoundly and generously affected by others. My patients have taught me the power and resiliency of the human spirit - the capacity of human beings to endure great hardship, pain, and emotional toil while greeting the uncertainty of their illnesses with courage, nobility and grace. I vividly recall the parents of a child with an untreatable form of sarcoma who I met while at UCSF - I have always retained the gift of their courage, their alacrity, their generosity, their capacity to give to their child, to one another, and to me, despite bearing unimaginable pain and loss. Through these experiences, I learned the humility engendered by the strength and trust of my patients, the obligation of continuous learning, and that human health is inextricably linked to the human condition.

My mentors generously shared their contagious passion for excellence, the power of committing to something larger than oneself, and the exhilaration of discovery and healing.

I have been continually energized by the optimism of trainees at all levels, their sense of possibility, and their inspired questioning-why? How? How can we improve?

Although I have witnessed almost unimaginable achievements by colleagues in diagnosis and treatment over the course of my career, I believe that for most of us, our legacy will not be the grants we are awarded, the books and papers we write, the discoveries we make, but, instead, will be the people we empower.

If my inner GHC could speak, it would remind us that despite the historical impact of our profession on society, we still have much to accomplish. We work in a health care system that is too costly and distributes value unequally throughout our society. We see signs of disaffection in our physician colleagues. We have unprecedented opportunities to treat human disease, yet we have a growing shortage of physician investigators. Our health systems are increasingly pressured by payment reform, the difficulty of distributing high value care throughout all segments of society, and the need to reform their governance structures to meet these challenges.

The GHC might reassure us, however, that medicine has faced great challenges throughout its history by adhering to the timeless tenets of medical professionalism - our metaphorical North Star. It would also remind us of our responsibility to serve and to lead from wherever we stand in medicine, and to be responsive to what our patients need from us.

I close by thanking you for inviting me to this ceremony and offering congratulations to the students. UCSF has always equipped its graduates to serve our patients and our profession with distinction, and to find the North Star of medical professionalism, for that, I will always be grateful. I join with each of you in sharing in the pride of affiliation with this great institution and urge you to listen to your inner Gold Headed Cane.

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