

Through the generosity of Charles R. Millikan, D. Min., vice president for spiritual care and values integration, an annual award competition was established at The Methodist Hospital among the resident staff. For the second competition, residents submitted a poem or essay of 1,000 words or less for the topic, "On Being a Doctor." A committee of five was selected from The Methodist Hospital Education Institute to judge the entries. Criteria for judging were established by this committee. This is the 3rd-place winning essay and last in the series.



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THE WRITING OF MY CONSTITUTION

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At the age of 15, I had decided I was a future lawyer. This revelation came to me shortly after competing in the UIL State Cross-Examination Debate Finals as a high school freshman. As the only all-freshman team in attendance, my partner and I were told that we had become the first all-freshman team in 20 years to advance this far. Even after being eliminated, I was riding high on a cloud of jubilation and subsequently decided my future right there in the middle of the University of Texas campus. This whimsical verdict was reinforced with an additional trip to the state tournament, and it continued to be in vogue when I graduated high school and made a trip with my brother to see my grandparents in Nevada.

My grandfather had recently been diagnosed with a brain tumor, and while I was not aware of the prognosis at the time, I could extract the grimness of it from the pain in my mother's eyes as she made reservations for us to spend two weeks with a dying man I had met only once before. I expected those few weeks to be filled with awkwardness and tears, but I went along anyway knowing that this was probably my last chance to get to know such a successful man.

Both of my grandparents were retired physicians and one of those rare couples who took their commitment in life to the workplace. They had spent many years working together at Los Angeles County General Hospital and later in Sitka, Alaska. Given their specialties, their workdays did not just collide on a casual, happenstance basis. Their greetings were typically under some of the most tenuous circumstances known to the medical field. You see, he was a trauma surgeon, and she, more often than not, was the anesthesiologist trying desperately to stabilize his patient on the operating room table. Marriage is not typically easy, but they both agreed that they had somehow managed to add a whole new level of intricacy to their marital vows. Nevertheless, they endured, and when I visited them on a sunny morning in June of 2003, they had maintained their commitment to one another for just over 50 years. Both agreed that this next phase of their lives was undoubtedly the most trying period in their relationship.

Throughout the next two weeks, I heard more amazing stories than in my previous 18 years of life. The most significant points of our conversations, however, came when the topic turned to life itself. One night I asked my grandfather, "What was best about being a doctor?" To this day I can recall almost his entire answer,

but what struck me most was his final comment: "The purpose of life is a life of purpose." At first I did not fully comprehend the meaning behind this statement. But later on that night, as I lay in bed, it dawned on me. It was then that I made a second promise to myself...to live a life of purpose.

My grandfather passed away a little more than a month after we left Nevada, but I had already made the decision that my life of purpose included becoming a physician. Today, as I sit at my desk reliving those two weeks I spent with my grandparents, I can honestly say that the most important lessons to be learned were not those that pertained strictly to the medical profession or to relationships in general, but to be applied every day that we live.

These are the lessons I learned:

Commitment. When a patient comes under your care, you are committing yourself to their pain, their joy, and their future. In life, when you have children, you are making a promise that you will give them every opportunity to succeed and, more importantly, provide support for every failure they endure. In marriage, you commit to your spouse to share every tear...and every embrace.

Failure is a part of life. To this day I will never forget one of my grandfather's sage observations: "It is okay to try and fail, but never walk away feeling like you have let someone down." In medicine, complications and, unfortunately, death are a reality that every doctor will undoubtedly face. What is important is knowing and being comfortable with the fact that you gave your best effort in that patient's care, even when facing insurmountable odds.

You are only as good as your word. "Life is full of broken promises; don't let yours be the ones that fall apart." I have personally found this one difficult to embrace. When morning rounds are cut short but a patient still has questions for you, make sure that you remember that promise to return later in the day. Taking those extra five minutes will do even more than foster the patient-doctor relationship; by starting a practice of adhering to your word now, it will be much easier to adhere to in the future.

Nobody is perfect. Every second there are a thousand opportunities to do something wrong but only one to do something right. One might not always make the right choice, but I have found that when a person develops their own "personal Constitution," it makes that decision much easier. I am just happy I had my Grandpa to help me write mine.