

The Greatest Love of All: Mindfulness, Self-care and the Preservation of Mental Health in Medical Practice



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The theme of my commencement messages evolved from: *Of Thomasian Excellence 2018; Of Filters, Sponges and Stars 2019; Of Changes, Challenges and Chances 2020 and 2021; Of Prototypes and Profiles 2022; Of Response and Resilience 2023; Building Grit and Resilience 2024.*

For this year, allow me to touch on “The Greatest Love of All: Mindfulness, Self-care and the Preservation of Mental Health in Medical Practice”.

Today is an important day in your medical journey - the celebration of a milestone that will truly change your life. You stand tall - not just as new doctors, but as survivors... and survival means having to change countless times – your perspectives, mindsets, strategies, decisions and directions – all for the single intent of bringing yourself closer to that dream of a medical career.

You have learned how to ask, observe, diagnose and treat, which will ultimately save lives. But as you enter the sacred calling of medicine, I invite you to carry with you one final, enduring lesson: “that next to God and to our brethren, learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.”

Yes, it was lifted from a ballad, but it holds a deeper truth, especially in the medical profession, where self-sacrifice is often mistaken for heroism and burnout is worn like a badge of honor.

In medicine, it seems self-sacrifice is the rule and being burned out is the benchmark. That is not necessarily true. You will do great things. You will

comfort families in despair. You will offer answers where there were once only questions.

But remember this: you cannot pour from an empty cup. You cannot give what you do not have. You cannot share what you do not own. You try to heal others, but never forget to tend to your own wounds. The need to preserve the integrity of a physician’s body, mind and soul cannot be overstated. In fact, it must be emphasized at every chance it presents itself. It must be reiterated continuously to make sure it is practiced and perfected. The importance of preserving our health, the totality of it, is as vital as life itself. The need for self-care, self-compassion, as well as the value of being in the moment, are but some tools to make sure mental health is kept intact in our practice of medicine and beyond.

MINDFULNESS. In the noise of beeping monitors, busy wards and heavy patient traffic, you must discover moments of stillness. Mindfulness is not a luxury; it is a strong anchor grounded in reality. As Viktor Frankl said, “Between a stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space, is our power to choose our response”. Let that space be where you pause, ponder and pray to find yourself and make it whole again.

SELF-CARE. SELF-CARE is NOT selfish, it is survival. It is on a quiet walk after a long shift. It is saying “NO” when your plate is already full. It is in seeking help without shame. You are not a machine. You are a human being who chooses to serve but not to sink.

The truth is: medicine can be both beautiful and brutal. There will be days when the burden feels too heavy. On those days, remember that asking for help does not make you less of a doctor – it makes you more of a person. Speak kindly to yourself. Take your work seriously but yourself gently. Let us build a culture where silence is not the cost of strength.

PRESERVATION OF MENTAL HEALTH. We often hear these big words. And you will agree it has never been talked about as vigorously as it has been in history, except during and after the pandemic. One of the consequences of the global lockdown was to find ourselves in a seemingly more difficult existence, challenged by fear, anxiety and uncertainty. Mental health is not a destination, but a process. It is about how you drive, not where you are going.

A wise teacher once told a student: “You do not need to set yourself on fire to keep others warm”. So instead, keep your light burning. Gently. Steadily. Simply because the world does not need doctors who know only science; it needs healers who are whole, who are present and who live the truth they tell their patients; “You matter. Your health matters. Your mind matters.”

As you step into bigger shoes as Thomasian medical doctors, remember that the journey ahead will be filled with trials and triumphs. Life does not come with a winning formula or a surefire pattern to success. You learn as you go. You deepen your point of view as you age. The rules are made to be broken, and you must be fierce enough to live your life in your own terms, believing in what you have and not apologizing for what you lack. Life is about taking chances. Go against the flow. Refuse to be cowed by conformity. Seek your passion. Take the road less travelled instead of the well-

beaten trail. Laugh despite adversity and leap before you look.

Take calibrated risks and calculated chances, but do not be afraid to take them because a lifetime is not forever. Take that first chance when it knocks at your door. Do not wait for the second one because there may never be one. Do not be afraid to make mistakes, just avoid the fatal ones. This is life, and this is expected. True failure is one where you did not get a second chance at something you did not take a first chance at all.

As you walk out the portals of our beloved Alma Mater, may you carry not only your stethoscope and white coat, but more importantly, your INNER COMPASS – one that points toward presence, protection and preservation of your well-being.

Yes... The greatest love of all is NOT only for God and our brethren – it starts with you. Only when we care for ourselves can we genuinely care for the world.

My dear medical graduates, seize every opportunity to take that chance to be better, brighter and bolder. The world is for you to conquer and we believe that after years in the UST Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, we have prepared you well to undergo changes, face challenges and take the chances life will present you with.

As your Alma Mater opens its doors for you to discover the world, please remember to come back to the home where your promising future was born – the “great” UST Faculty of Medicine and Surgery – home of the biggest, the brightest and the best.

Go and radiate the world with our Thomasian light and fill the world with the Thomasian attributes of competence, commitment and compassion. May you heal many and never forget to heal yourselves.

Congratulations to the Thomasian physicians of the UST Medicine Class of 2025.