Introduction

Eminent Chancellor, Madame President, Representatives Board of Governors, graduates, family and friends – Congratulations to the graduating class and happy birthday to all! How many times in life do we get to celebrate 100 years? Enjoy!

One hundred years ago, Henry Marshall Tory founded this University, just as oil was discovered in nearby Turner Valley and the transcontinental railway connected Canada’s two coasts. Over the century, the University of Alberta has contributed to impressive health progress. Canadian life expectancy has doubled to 81 -- 3 years more than America’s. Lifespan is gaining 2 months annually; each year that we survive, we gain an extra “a freebee” of 2 months of life!

Knowledge and its application are at the heart of these gains. The path breaking Flexner Report in 1910 revolutionized medical education by introducing science-based curriculum in university medical schools. Alberta was among the leaders that pioneered the Flexner model in North America, spurred by a grant in 1923 from the Rockefeller Foundation. My China Medical Board foundation, founded in 1914 endowed by Rockefeller, established in parallel the Flexner model in China, the famous Peking Union Medical College.

You graduates are joining today a global profession of 9 million doctors sharing a common knowledge base -- proven over the past century -- embarking on an exciting journey of professional service. But you are entering a new world vastly different than Flexner’s. To navigate the future, I would like to offer three life lessons:

- Travel in, learn from, and engage with our **global village**
- **Apply your knowledge** by innovating, learning from failure for success
- Animate your professionalism with **social passion**

Global Village

St Augustine said: “The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.” As a Chinese-American immigrant, I had expected a life-long career on only one page. But my wife, daughter of Presbyterian missionaries, wanted to return to the India of her childhood. After residency at the Mass General Hospital, I applied to NIH to study cholera in Bangladesh. Upon arrival, I immediately learned how it feels to be an illiterate! I could not read street signs or menus! I also learned that life invariably throws us curve balls!
In November 1970, a powerful cyclone struck Bangladesh. A tsunami-like tidal wave 20 feet high swept across the southern coast killing a half million people. My wife implored: “You have to go! You're a doctor!” So, I followed Yogi Berra: “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!” I helicoptered to Manpura Island 2 meters above sea level in the Bay of Bengal. Survivors were in a daze, and rice stalks normally on the ground were hanging high in the branches. As we were pitching a pup tent, a local high schooler came up and said “that is not a good place!” Was he a smart aleck or trying to squeeze money? He then explained: “When high tide comes tonight, you’ll be swimming in your tent!” Modern technology could fly me down to a backward island, but local knowledge saved me from embarrassment!

A newly minted doctor, I wanted to offer emergency medical aid. Survivors formed a long queue, but women were few, and children were absent having been swept away. After seeing 20 patients, I quickly concluded that my Harvard training was powerless without my customary diagnostic and therapeutic tools. To be effective, modern knowledge must be adapted to specific contexts.

Knowledge in Action

I’ve had the good fortune at trying to apply knowledge across the breadth of Asia -- Bangladesh-India-Southeast Asia-China -- working for foundations, universities, and NGOs -- especially BRAC, the world’s largest. I’ve witnessed many exciting innovations, and also many failures. But don't be afraid of failure because they can be the root of success.

My happiest times were weekly boat trip on the Meghna river for overnights at the Cholera Research Lab Matlab field station, where we studied rural health delivery, especially application of oral rehydration therapy -- what Lancet called the most important medical discovery of the 20th century. Drinking the right combination of salt-sugar water could save lives by replacing dehydrating fluid losses due to diarrhea.

How to get the right ORT mixture? Initially, WHO insisted upon packets of ingredients poured into pre-measured water; but packets were too expensive for the poor. But every home had salt and sugar! BRAC developed three-finger pinch of labon and fistful of gur in a ½ liter of water, marked by scratching pots at home to show the right water level. The home-brew worked just fine!

How to get ORT knowledge to mothers? Thousands of female BRAC workers eventually reached every home in Bangladesh! The program worked because an NGO was bold and ambitious (reaching 5 times the population of Canada) and because of double motivation – a mother to save her child and a worker to get salary! Workers were paid according to how well mothers learned, as measured by a 10% sample survey one month after the teaching visit!

Passionate Professionalism
Based out of Cambridge Massachusetts, I travel half time throughout Asia, mostly China, the emerging center of our 21st century world. In the foyer of Shanghai Medical College hangs a portrait of Canadian Norman Bethune who traveled to China in pursuit of his professional passions. Bethune died in 1939 at age of 49 due to septicemia contracted after he cut his finger during surgery on a wounded Chinese soldier. He was totally exhausted from lack of sleep. Mao Zedong eulogized the *Bethune spirit* of “utter devotion to others without any thought of self!”

I cannot claim such martyrdom, but I can claim passionate professionalism:

- Speaking up after witnessing genocide in Bangladesh
- Running a clinic serving thousands of malnourished Bengali children
- Supporting dedicated NGOs like BRAC in anti-poverty work
- Promoting health and gender equity, and primary care for all

These professional passions came to me from traveling, learning, and engaging in translating knowledge into action. Global professionalism as part of global citizenship is not only smart but also essential. I’ve been blessed by -- and I hope you too will find -- what Theodore Roosevelt said:

“Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.”

Congratulations to you graduates, and God speed in your quest for working hard at work worth doing!