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New York Medical College — The First 101 Years

*An address by Thomas J. Martin, Vice President and General Counsel of
New York Medical College.*

On the evening of April 12, 1865, Good Friday of that year, at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., John Wilkes Booth fired the shot that took the life of Abraham Lincoln, one of the most beloved of American presidents and one of the most revered leaders the world has ever come to know.

At the very moment Booth was perpetrating his infamous deed, one of his co-conspirators, Lewis Paine, was making his way to the home of William H. Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State and former Governor of New York. Seward at that time was bedridden, recovering from serious injuries sustained a few days before when thrown from his runaway carriage. Lewis Paine gained initial entry into the Seward home peaceably by deceit, but after doing so, he struck violently at the members of the Seward household until he was able to gain access to Seward's sick room. Once there, Paine took after the Secretary of State with a large knife intending to complete the second assassination of that evening. Despite his debilitated condition Seward was able to throw himself from his bed onto the floor and thus thwart the purpose of his would-be-assassin, but not without suffering serious slash wounds about the head and neck. With the renewed intervention of the Seward household, Lewis Paine fled and immediately medical assistance was summoned to aid the twice-stricken Secretary of State.

The first physician to arrive at the scene of this misadventure was one T. S. Verdi, who was physician to the Seward family. Verdi was able to stem the flow of blood from Secretary Seward's wounds and, despite the horror of the scene, was able shortly to inform the anxious family that Seward's wounds would not be mortal.

A fact of history that has been preserved by only a few is that Dr. T. S. Verdi, a physician who played a noteworthy role in events that will reverberate down through all the centuries of our nation's history, was a graduate of New York Medical College, or, as it was then known, The Homeopathic College of Medicine of the State of New York in New York City.

New York Medical College was founded in 1860, a mere lustrum before the events of the Lincoln assassination. The founders of the Medical College were noteworthy members of New York society of that day, including, as the College's first president, William Cullen Bryant, the noted civic leader, poet and publisher of the New York Post. The Medical College was created to follow the school of homeopathic medicine, in reaction to some of the excessive practices of allopathic medicine then current, such as bleeding, blistering and over-medication with large doses of harmful drugs. Homeopathic medicine was a more benign form of ministrations that, however, was gradually abandoned by the Medical College and the medical profession as the body of related knowledge became unified and evolved into modern medical science.

From its earliest years, New York Medical College has been no stranger to the tumultuous and controversial events and currents of our society. Many is the hurdle that has had to be overcome by those who guided the Medical College and its development over the many decades that have followed its founding.

But doubtless controversy and tumult must attend the affairs of any institution that has been able to sustain a mission for 131 years without interruption. Indeed, the legacy that we celebrate here today must, of necessity, embody the industry, the perseverance and the dedication of a league of our institutional ancestors who struggled with and surmounted the difficulties of their times and who deflected assaults upon the institution and its aspirations from without and from within.

While, as with any human endeavor, there may have been a rare exception, we would believe that all of those persons, into whose hands over the decades was placed the destiny of New York Medical College, were individuals of purposeful integrity and a firm sense of mission, especially their mission to the students of the medical school and to the patients for whose care and well-being they would become responsible.

As a medical school, for as long as New York Medical College has existed, society and the people have delegated to it a sacred trust. That trust is to use, to teach to our students and to build upon that accumulated body of knowledge and skill handed down by our institutional ancestors, with honesty, the utmost integrity and with the conviction that New York Medical College and its people exist as an institution to serve the cause of life and the welfare of others without discrimination.

That trust, granted to us by the people, is unique and carries with it great privilege. It permits our faculty, our students and our graduates to subject innocent people, whose confidence they have gained, to acts and procedures that in any other context would, by the words used to describe them, evoke the specter of violence — words such as cut, sever, saw, stick, break, and irradiate.

To those and to that institution to whom and to which such great privilege is entrusted, much is, and must be, expected, and not only expected, but demanded. The people and the society that entrust to us great

privilege have the right to expect and demand from us the highest skills and the highest integrity in all that we do within and without the institution, and the highest character for the institution itself. They may rightfully demand that institutionally and individually we live up unceasingly to the highest principles of the professions of medicine, of teaching and of the search for new knowledge. They may demand that we take seriously the word "profession", a word which means to execute a specialized body of knowledge with competence, with unselfish concern for our patients or our clients, and without undue attraction towards personal enrichment or aggrandizement.

New York Medical College, as any institution, acts only through its people. At New York Medical College, we aspire to greatness, greatness in what we profess and greatness in the execution of the profound privilege placed in our care. But as an institution, New York Medical College can only ever achieve greatness to the degree that all the people that share in its mission have the same aspiration for the institution and for themselves in their personal lives and character.

Greatness is a word that is often used but is rarely defined. It is used in the case of major world events; to describe important discoveries, or to describe substantial personal or cooperative accomplishments. Greatness is ascribed to leaders of our society — in science, in medicine, in education, in politics, in the arts and in business. But, I submit, greatness can also be seen, unadorned and without obscuring complexity, in all those who carry out even the simplest trust, with humility, with unflagging industry to their task and with denial of excessive ego and ambition for self. Greatness can be seen in the lives of a Dr. Albert Schweitzer and a Dr. Tom Dooley who dedicated themselves to the care of obscure and forgotten people. It can be seen even today in the life of a Mother Teresa, who, to use the words of St. Paul, "pours herself out as a libation" to care for the dying and destitute of this world for no reward in this life but only to serve her God.

At New York Medical College, greatness is apparent in the lives of many of our faculty and staff. It resides in many of those who spend their lives in our hospitals in East Harlem and in the South Bronx toiling, often under the most difficult conditions, to care for the most needy of our brothers and sisters. Greatness exists among our teachers, when they give of themselves from their substance to guide our students along the paths of knowledge in medicine, in the basic medical sciences and in the health sciences, and when they faithfully carry out their responsibility continually to update their knowledge for the sake and betterment of our students, their colleagues in science and the people we serve.

Greatness exists in the scientist who labors for years at the research bench with unremitting diligence and integrity, subjected always to the anxieties and vagaries of apparent productivity and future sources of funding for her or his work.

Greatness can be seen in the Trustees of New York Medical College, when, for no tangible reward, they spend countless hours executing the

trust and responsibilities placed in them by law and by our society.

But greatness is not reserved for the prominent or the exalted. Greatness can exist in the laborer who empties our trash baskets and sweeps our floors each evening, when such a person — made in the image and likeness of God — executes her or his responsibilities honestly and with a commitment to serve to the best of her or his abilities.

The common cords that run through the greatness in all the undertakings I have described are service to others and the purity of intention of those who choose to serve.

Human beings are imperfect and complex creatures. What we do we do often for imperfect and complex reasons. But, in the quest for greatness, to the degree that we in a profession of service see the world and the roles allotted to us through the lens, purely, of that trust placed in our hands, and to the degree that we purely intend in all our endeavors to execute that trust faithfully, then, to those degrees, we will as individuals and as an institution approach the greatness to which we aspire. To the extent that we permit our vision to be obscured by the material distractions and the earth-bound passions of this world, to that extent, our intentions will be less than pure and our achievements less than great.

Those of us who hold dear the New Testament and those of us who see the consistency of the common teachings of the Old and New Testaments have enjoined upon us the charge to be “as wise as the serpent and as guileless as the dove.” We are in this world but we are not entirely of this world. We must recognize the ways of the world, but we must not always be one with them. We live in the midst of complexity and, indeed, things at New York Medical College may seem to become more complex every day. but, when it comes to truth, candor and integrity between and among ourselves, complexity has little place. While we must remain aware of the sometimes serpentine sagacity of this world, guilelessness with, between and among ourselves should be our goal. The end never justifies the means no matter how noble the end, and honesty and candor may never be sacrificed among ourselves in the name of some greater good. If we can achieve the guilelessness of the dove in our relationships inside and outside the institution, then we will affirm that our integrity is not compartmentalized, that the purity of our intentions penetrates to the core of our consciences, that we hold sacred and inviolate the trust that is ours, and that we truly seek greatness in our institution and in ourselves.

In this talk today, I do not call for perfection. God knows, and the people here know, I have no right to do so. I do, however, urge upon myself, and upon all of you, and upon all of New York Medical College, a resolve and an attitude of mind and will that makes the desire for perfection in the execution of our sacred trust and in our quest for greatness a conscious motive in all our actions.

We are all fallible and we all have our personal responsibilities to family and outside community, and to provide for their welfare. We need not seek for penury or total self-abnegation. But, in our quest for greatness, we

should subjugate excessive personal ambition for dedicated industry; we should not seek after fame or fortune but be grateful for the fair share we earn by the estimation of others; we should not engage in competition for its own sake but only, fairly, for the sake of our common goals; and we should not seek after reputation as a form of self-aggrandizement but only as reputation becomes deserved by good works and dedication to our trust.

That we meet here today in a house of God, attests to the fact that we are all ultimately called to higher realms. It affirms the fact that we are never alone — that our inmost thoughts and most hidden motivations are never entirely secret. And it reminds us that, if we but call upon Him, we have a Friend in high places Who will never fail to assist us in the pursuit of our honest and noble purposes. With God's help, and with purity in our intentions to carry out our work and our trust with singlemindedness and a commitment from the heart, we at New York Medical College, individually and as an institution, can make the best of our resources and become truly a great institution of great people.

We salute and pay homage to our honorees who today have received the College's Medal for Distinguished Service in Health Care. We thank them sincerely for their contributions to our common purposes and for their service to others. I know they will treasure the honor bestowed upon them at this Convocation. They now share the distinction of wearing about their necks the likeness of one who can inspire all of us because he led a life imbued with all the positive qualities I have described here today — Terence Cardinal Cooke. May God bless his memory and those who now bear his countenance. And, may God continue his blessings on New York Medical College and on this assembly.
