

## JA Senior Banquet - April 26th

Thank you for inviting me to speak tonight. This is a tremendous honor to be here with you. It means even more to me because my son, Emery, is a part of this class, and I've had the chance to see so many of you go from start to finish at JA, or join the JA family along that trail, and form friendships that are going to last a lifetime. And some of those will last a lifetime.

Graduation is a time when you see and hear a lot of advice giving, and I'll confess right now that this talk will not be much different in that regard. However, there is so much that I wish I had known better when I graduated from high school. Some of that can only be obtained by living your life, but sometimes words will stick with you, and they will make a difference when you need it most. With all that in mind, I have five actions to share with you and expand upon. Maybe when you need to recall a word of encouragement, one or all of these will come to you.

The first is **Show Up**. This can have two meanings. You can show up physically, and that alone is very, very important. Show up for class, for meetings, for practices if you are an athlete, for events, for important times in others' lives. You will be amazed at how far simply showing up will take you. Your professors will be much more willing to listen to your concerns, talk through a problem with you, and help you where you may be struggling if you just show up for class. You will meet more people, make more friends, be more fulfilled, and be able to help others be more fulfilled when you show up. Personally, several opportunities I've had in my professional life have been solely because I showed up at one two-day medical meeting in New Orleans in 2011 for 12 hours.

It's one thing to show up physically; however, it's another thing to show up mentally prepared for the activity for which you have shown up. When we talk to our internal medicine residents at UMMC about the

three most important things they can do to be successful, showing up mentally prepared with a growth mindset is #1. How many times have you seen the more talented lose to the less talented, the unthinkable mistake happen in the clutch, the failure to communicate leading to a disastrous outcome? Most of these instances go back to an individual or individuals not showing up mentally prepared day in and day out. You will all have days where gathering the energy to be there and be engaged will be hard, but finding a way to still be there and be engaged is what leads to success or to other opportunities. I learned this lesson best when I was a hematology/oncology fellow from 2009-2012, and I'll come back to that a little later.

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When I was a third year medical student on the internal medicine rotation, we had a weekly EKG lecture with one of our cardiologists at UMMC. I've always found EKGs intimidating, and everyone can be thankful that I am not a cardiologist and rarely will anyone's life depend on my read of an EKG. For that reason, though, these lectures really had an impact on me. They gave me confidence that I could do this (read EKGs). However, it was what came at the end of the lecture that always stood out. Dr. Smith (the lecturer) would finish by saying, "Now go and do the right thing." And that's my 2nd action to share with you - **Do the Right Thing.**

You will be endlessly challenged throughout your life to make decisions that are hard. Figuring out what to do can be paralyzing. Many of you have heard of or used the term FOMO - Fear Of Missing Out. This is the title to a book that was published almost one year ago to the day, written by Patrick McGinnis. FOMO comes from seeing or hearing what others are doing and wishing you were there doing the same thing. You've all experienced FOMO and knew it at the time, but something else you've experience is FOMO's cousin, FOBO - Fear Of Better Option. This is the concern that there is always a better choice to make. It's also

known as risk aversion, or analysis paralysis. The quickest route to limiting FOMO or analysis paralysis is settling in your mind that you will Do the Right Thing, even when it is exceedingly painful and hard to do it.

The temptations in our world are everywhere. Once you depart and are living “on your own,” there will be fewer people around you limiting your options, advising you on what’s best without you asking for their advice, and keeping your best interest at heart. People will want to take advantage of you, use you for their own purposes, and leave you high and dry when the repercussions of bad decisions arrive. Sometimes they will do this without even realizing they’re doing it. Remember that you don’t live in a vacuum. The decisions you make impact others; they have the power to ruin lives, and not just your own. However, they also have the power to help you and others change the world in a positive way, more than you can ever imagine. Surround yourself with people who genuinely care for you. Lean on them when you need guidance. Know the right time to say no, and don’t be afraid to stand by that answer.

One of the hardest things I have to do in my current line of work is tell a resident that he or she cannot be promoted to the next year or that he or she must be dismissed from the program. The former has happened three times in the last three years; the latter has happened twice. It is an unpleasant experience for me and for the resident, but based on the information at hand, it’s the right thing for everyone, especially our patients, who may be harmed by us graduating a resident before he or she is ready to practice independently. I owe it to your parents, your grandparents, your aunts and uncles, and everyone else not to let my own discomfort get in the way of doing the right thing for them. If you ever want to see how horribly this can play out, listen to the podcast entitled Dr. Death that came out in 2018. It’s the story of how a neurosurgeon who was shuffled along in his residency and through

graduation killed or maimed 33 of the first 38 people on whom he operated once out of training. Your decisions won't always have those kinds of ramifications, but at the same time you may never know what ramifications some of your decisions have, and it's the habit of doing the right thing that must be reinforced, even with the small matters. As Professor Dumbledore put it so well at the end of *The Goblet of Fire*, "Soon we must all face the choice between what is right and what is easy." Do the Right Thing.

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Graduation is a time that we often talk about lofty success, high hopes and aspirations, big dreams, and big goals; and all of that is appropriate. I've always been a huge believer in dreaming big ever since Stan Jones ingrained that in our basketball team when I was a 10th grader. That year we ended Prep's 64 game winning streak in basketball on their home court on Valentine's Day in the South State championship game. It could not have been any sweeter, just like the volleyball state championship, the victory over Prep in November on their football field, and the boys soccer state championship win over Prep to end their 10 year title streak occurring on the same day as the girls basketball state championship. However, I will tell you now that, just like there were struggles in volleyball, football, soccer, and basketball that led up to those successes, you are guaranteed to have struggles in life. **Embrace the Struggle.** And that's the third action to share with you. You are being molded into the person you can be by these struggles.

I can't say that I have personally embraced the struggles in my life, which pale in comparison to the ones others face, but I have learned better to embrace them. My father was an oncologist (cancer doctor) for 46 years. I had grown up watching him take care of people who were vulnerable, scared, and in desperate need of help. He was a role model for me and still is. I always wanted to do what he was doing so I applied for and entered a hematology/oncology fellowship immediately

after spending one year as a chief resident of the internal medicine residency, a job I loved far more than I expected I would.

(As background, medical education is structured as 4 years of medical school followed by 3-7 years of residency depending on what you enter, followed by a fellowship if you choose to sub specialize. The chief resident year is an additional year after residency of leadership of the residents.)

When I was a hematology/oncology fellow from 2009-2012, I discovered quickly that this may not be the career intended for me. I expected the work to be hard and for the emotions of the patient care to be challenging, but I didn't expect to be downright unhappy and finding very little joy in work. After struggling through the first of those three years, I ignored those struggles (didn't embrace them, just ignored them) and committed to practicing at UMMC in lung cancer specifically for two years after graduation from fellowship. I disregarded good advice given to me by my wife and also by a mentor of mine who told me that once I sign my name, it's too late to negotiate. So, there I was, committed to a job I didn't enjoy not only for the last two years of fellowship, but for two more years after that. And not only would this be oncology, it would be the cancer with some of the worst outcomes of all.

The university arranged for me to spend three months at Vanderbilt with their lung cancer program to get a better feel for how to construct one (UMMC didn't have one at the time) and to get involved with research. One month before leaving, though, our house was struck by lightning and nearly burned to the ground, almost like a sign from God. I couldn't leave for those three months, and in that time, I turned back to what I had enjoyed much more, the education of internal medicine residents. I began to attend their conferences more and get involved,

thinking perhaps I could balance oncology and resident education in my career.

Then in my third year of fellowship, my best friend from high school, Scott Branning, a long time JA employee and assistant basketball coach as well, developed metastatic colon cancer and within 6 weeks of his diagnosis he passed away. It was terribly painful. The following two years, which were my last two years in oncology, I had a stream of patients who died from their lung cancer. Some of those endings felt personal, people passing away with children the same age as my own or people whom I had come to know well dying tragically. It gave me a tremendous respect for those who practice oncology day in and day out. I learned so much about them, about myself, and about life from these five years of experience. I learned that even when it's hard to walk into the building to do your job, you still need to do it. Someone is depending on you. Even when inside you're dreading the next time someone asks you to help them by seeing another patient, you need to be glad to see that one more patient. One day, maybe even 5 minutes later, you will be the person asking for help. One day, as we tell the residents, you will be the patient. One day you will need someone to say yes.

All of you will struggle. Your struggles won't be mine, and they won't be your friends'. They will be yours. After all, we are each different; we are each human; we each have free will. But there will always be others who can identify because they, too, are struggling in some way. Don't ever forget that, and don't ever be too proud to admit you are struggling, especially if it's significant. Life is not a bed of roses; it's not even a path of roses. And that's the way it's supposed to be. If this were a perfect and seamless life, you would never know that was even the case. Embrace your struggles; use them to grow into who God made you to be.

As a bridge to the fourth action I have to share with you, I have a lighter example of embracing the struggle. Some of you know that my favorite professional tennis player is Rafael Nadal. When I first became a fan, it was only because he was THE ONE person who could beat Roger Federer. Plus, he was ripped with muscle, fast, emotional, dressed like a pirate, could play forever, and he could hit the ball in a way like no one else, heavy topspin with his whip-like forehand. About his career, Nadal has said, "I learned during all my career to enjoy suffering." And I think along the way he has managed to find some success!

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If you have followed Rafael Nadal for any length of time, you know that for him, just the opposite of Roger Federer who glides gracefully around the court, every point of every match is a grind. As Nadal himself has said, "I play each point like my life depends on it." It's how he wins, especially on a clay court. Few others have the will to grind it out with him on a surface where you have to earn every point, where you can't just hit it as hard as you can and beat the other guy. However, even more remarkable about Rafael Nadal to me is his ability to put what just happened behind him and to play the next point. And that is my fourth encouragement to you - **Play the Next Point.**

The examples of this for Nadal are so numerous that you only have to go back to yesterday to find one. Playing a very talented opponent 12 years younger than him (Believe me, you will one day understand why that is significant.) who had won 17 sets in a row before the match, Nadal had two match points at 6-4, 5-4, and he converted neither. About 10 minutes later in the 2nd set tiebreaker, he double faulted at 6-6, giving his opponent Stefanos Tsitsipas set point, which Tsitsipas converted. Just like that the match went from seconds from its end to there being another hour of work. Most, almost all, players would have folded, thinking about the failure to take advantage of those opportunities. Even more, the last time Nadal had played Tsitsipas,

Nadal had blown a two set lead for only the third time in his career in the quarterfinals of the Australian Open, missing two overheads he would make 99% of the time, to turn the match around in Tsitsipas' favor. But, as Nadal has said, "Enduring means accepting. Accepting things as they are and not as you would wish them to be, and then looking ahead, not behind." Play the next point. And he did, and he had to work and struggle and claw his way through the 3rd set, fighting off a match point against him at 4-5, to eventually win the third set 7-5 and win the match.

Rafael Nadal is unspeakably talented, but so are hundreds of other professionals on the tennis court. He plays left-handed, but he's actually right-handed. He's had countless injuries; he was told hundreds of times that he wouldn't make it past the age of 30 on the tour (he's now 34); he was written off completely by the press in 2015 and 2016 as he struggled. Yet here he is, one grand slam championship away from being the winningest men's tennis player of all time in grand slam tournaments. Maybe he gets there; maybe he doesn't. But Rafa would tell you, "My motivation is tomorrow, just one day at a time, right?"

No matter what successes or failures come your way, playing the next point will be essential to your navigation of life. Many people have been crushed by their failures, and also, interestingly, by their successes. Enjoy your successes, but don't let them be the end all be all. Learn from your failures, but don't let them be the end all be all either. Play the next point, run the next play, make the next decision, truly live the next day. No matter how deep the hole or how high the mountain, where you go from there depends on what happens next and not on what has already happened. And even when it's not success or failure, when it's a day to day decision that you wish you had made differently or a conversation that you wish had gone the other way, remember that it's how you handle the next time that largely



determines how that moment will impact your trajectory. Glen Close, playing Iris in *The Natural* (one of my favorite movies), sums it up well, “I believe we have two lives, the life we learn with and the life we live with after that.”

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Show Up, Do the Right Thing, Embrace the Struggle, Play the Next Point, and finally, **Value your Time**. Before I cover this last part I want to again thank you for asking me to speak tonight and to be a part of this special occasion. All of you have so much potential to make a positive impact on our country and our world, and I want you to know that the Jackson Academy family loves each of you and will be one of your biggest supporters. Twenty-seven years ago I had the chance to deliver a message about time, and I want to close with that same message with you tonight.

If you had a bank that credited your account each morning with \$86,400, that carried over no balance from day to day and thereby allowed you to keep no cash in your account, and that every evening canceled whatever part of the amount you had failed to use during the day, what would you do? Obviously, you would draw out every cent. Amazingly enough, you do have such a bank; its name is “time.” Every morning it credits you with 86,400 seconds. Every night it rules off, as lost, whatever of this you have failed to invest to good purposes. If you fail to use the day’s deposits, the loss is yours.

As you go on to a life that will soon be free of the regimented schedules and daily routines of high school and home, you must make good use of the constant that works within every one of our lives: time. Time has constituted the past, creates the present, and will shape the future.

When you speak of the events of your elementary, junior high, and high school years, time serves as the foundation that turns these events into

special memories. As we proceed with this event tonight, time passes by, turning each acknowledgment that is made and each word that is said into a part of history. The upcoming experience of college and everything beyond is dependent on the steady, consistent pace of time.

With these realizations, we have constructed methods that we may employ to save time. Build this car to travel faster, and look how much time you save. Make this digital tool to solve problems quicker, and look how much time you save. Develop this platform to receive messages sooner, and look how much time you save. However, it is not merely the time we save that is of importance, it is what we do with our saved time that makes the difference.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once wrote:

“Lives of great men all remind us,  
We can make our lives sublime;  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time.”

This poetic statement is applicable to the life of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin was one of the greatest statesmen of American history. At one point in his life, Franklin served as a member of the Pennsylvania Assembly, worked as one of two deputy postmaster generals of all the colonies, set up a dead-letter office, and arranged to have the mail carried more often and more swiftly, a plan that saved time for both himself and the colonies.

But it is not these time-saving arrangements by which we remember Benjamin Franklin today. It is what Benjamin Franklin did with his saved time that made him one of the most outstanding individuals of his era. He taught himself to read several foreign languages, play numerous musical instruments, and apply science to his daily life. Franklin’s experiment with a kite made of silk and metal during a severe

thunderstorm proved his theory that lightning is electricity, leading to his invention of the lightning rod and the use of such terms as “battery” and “condenser.” In *Poor Richard’s Almanack* Franklin put his wisdom into words: “Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time; for that’s the stuff life is made of.”

Upon the completion of this banquet tonight, all of you will return to your daily activities and those of you in the Class of 2021 will, in the near future, begin a new chapter in your life. Each of you will embark on your own set of adventures that will take you to locations with which you may already be familiar, to locations with which you are not as familiar across the country, and even to locations with which you are completely unfamiliar around the world, from less than four miles from this spot to over four thousand miles away from Jackson Academy. While there are mental, physical, and spiritual tests of high school, there is a larger test that awaits you that will be sure to challenge you in all areas, the test of time. The difficulty of the test does not hinge on how well you know it but on how well you use it. Time is as harmful as each individual allows it or as beneficial as each individual makes it.

In Voltaire’s *Zadig, A Mystery of Fate*, the following question is put to Zadig by the Grand Magi: “What, of all things in the world, is the longest and the shortest, the swiftest and the slowest, the most divisible and the most extended, the most neglected and the most regretted, without which nothing can be done, which devours all that is little, and enlivens all that is great?”

In response, Zadig says: “Time. Nothing is longer, for it is the measure of eternity. Nothing is shorter, since it is insufficient for the accomplishment of your projects. Nothing is more slow to him that expects; nothing more rapid to him that enjoys. In greatness, it extends to infinity; in smallness, it is infinitely divisible. All men neglect it; all regret the loss of it; nothing can be done without it. It consigns to

oblivion whatever is unworthy of being transmitted to posterity, and it immortalizes such actions as are truly great.”

I challenge all of you: take every second out of your bank and invest it wisely. A great return awaits those who pass the test of time. Thank you.