

gat “The Road Ahead”
Commencement Address by Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia
University of Massachusetts Medical School
Worcester, Massachusetts
Sunday, June 3, 2012

Chancellor Michael Collins;
Chairman James Karam and Members of the University of Massachusetts Board of Trustees;
Faculty, Staff and Students;
Fellow Honorands;
Members of the Graduating Class of 2012;
Parents, Family and Friends;
The Liberian Community here present;
Distinguished Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen;
Friends:

Allow me, first of all, to express my thanks and appreciation to Chancellor Collins and the Trustees of the University of Massachusetts for the invitation to deliver this year’s Medical School Commencement Address. You honor me by this invitation, but it is the people of Liberia, whom this institution continues to support, who are forever in your debt.

Thank you, also, for the distinguished honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters *honoris causa*, which this institution has bestowed upon me. You honor me by this. I am in excellent company, along with “America’s Doctor,” and a prominent Boston entrepreneur who has contributed so much toward medical research, particularly for cystic fibrosis. Their reflection at last night’s Commencement Dinner, recalling extraordinary service in humankind, touched the hearts of everyone. Dr. Benjamin, rising from humble beginnings, reached back in her success to serve poor communities. In his remarks, Mr. O’Donnell demonstrated extraordinary commitment and dedication to the discovery of a life-saving treatment for an affliction that had caused his family so much pain.

My Dear Friends: No matter how many honorary degrees I receive, each one holds a special meaning for me.

This one will always remind me of the very close bonds between my country and this Medical School, because so many of your students and faculty have taken time away from their own lives to travel to Liberia and provide life-saving medical care to ensure a healthy population. I am delighted that you now have support from USAID, granted to the UMass

Medical School, Indiana University and our University of Liberia, which will help to rebuild our healthcare education system and establish healthcare training programs.

My thanks to all of you who are, or will be, involved with healthcare training in Liberia, among them, Dean Terence R. Flotte, Dr. Katherine Luzuriaga and, on our side, Dr. Emmet A. Dennis, President of the University of Liberia. My people and my country appreciate all that you do.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Class of 2012: It is an honor to have been chosen to address you today -- you who will go on to greatly impact the lives of families and health policy the world over. Most of you are citizens of the world's largest economy and its most powerful country. As such, you will have a potential to impact globally. Use it wisely, for with so much power comes great responsibility.

Along with your family, friends and other loved ones, I extend hearty congratulations to you, graduates. What you have achieved is no small feat, for this a discipline that self-regulates. Along the way, commitment is tested, and those who get to where you are today, are those who should, ultimately, be here. You have come through one of the most rigorous training regimes for a modern profession, and everyone here recognizes and appreciates your perseverance and discipline. We celebrate you.

I wish I could say that the most demanding days of your chosen profession are behind you, and that it gets easier from here on out. But to say that, as you well know, would be untrue. For with each accomplishment come expectations and assumptions. There will be days that will test your commitment to this calling. I am, however, confident that the same perseverance that brought you this far will see you through.

In the same way that you began your journey that brought you to this place, Liberia, too, began the latest stage of our journey a little over six years ago when we came into office. The economy was in ruins, and our health sector, like all others, was not spared the destruction that engulfed the country during the civil upheaval. The health infrastructure – of hospitals, health centers and clinics – was destroyed or badly damaged, and the delivery of basic health services was almost non-existent. Only 41 percent of our people lived within one-hour walking distance of a health facility, most of them in urban areas. In a country of 3.5 million at the time, there were only 354 health facilities. The entire health workforce was 3,966, health professionals having fled the country. Only six of our 15 administrative political subdivisions had at least one medical doctor; the rest had none. In more ways than one, we inherited a wounded country, with dysfunctional institutions. Far beyond the

physical destruction and deprivation, we inherited a house that had been divided against itself. Liberia stood in dire need of healing.

The spirit, aspirations and hopes of our country had been tested by the long civil conflict. The scale and scope of the challenges were daunting and, in the midst of it all, sometimes we felt distracted and were tempted to lose sight of what mattered: that the restoration would take time; that the healing would take years, if not decades. The noise of life attempted to crowd out the “big picture”.

Very few of you will inherit problems on such a massive scale as that – you are, after all, doctors, nurses and scientists, not politicians. However, at one point or another, all of us face adversity; its presence is an argument for respite. You are the counterpoint to the pain of the world. After today, your presence will bring comfort and assurance to the distraught family member, the ailing patient, the anxious spouse and the frantic parent. It will be hard, sometimes, but always come back to the big picture – the big picture of your chosen profession – the preservation of life.

Beyond the diseases and other ailments that you cure, mitigate and alleviate, your profession fulfills a huge need – healing – and that is the big picture.

In the face of pain, shame, indignity, suffering and sorrow, there is a need for healing in the world, a need for hope, and that is what you represent. That is the calling you chose. Your very presence softens the severity of the pain of disease, validates life and soothes the pain. The world will need you – specifically for your profession, but generally for what you stand for. That is your big picture.

A thought I wish to share with you is this: Do the unrequited good deed, no matter how small. This is important for two reasons: you never know the returns from a beneficiary of the unrequited good. On a more basic level, the good reaffirms our humanity and strengthens the bonds that hold us together.

In unrequited kindness we find an affirmation of our humanity, our shared experiences. It strengthens the sense of community as active participants in human condition. As medical professionals, you will always be held in high esteem. People will respect you, and look up to you, and will emulate your good example. So, do good – be kind, especially when the beneficiary cannot reciprocate.

At last evening’s Commencement Dinner, in “personal reflection” I spoke about the HEARTT Foundation, because of its association with this Medical School. The acronym is for Health Education and Relief Through Teaching. UMMS has contributed many, many

doctors that have gone to Liberia in recent years and have made a difference by providing relief and healthcare services at our main referral hospital, the John F. Kennedy Medical Center. UMMS has been especially involved in the Pediatric Program by providing a pediatrician almost every month to JFK for the last three years at almost no expense to Liberia.

Like others, these doctors have continued to render humanitarian service without monetary reward to the thousands that cannot pay for this service. It would have been impossible to imagine the strides we have made in our health sector without the kindness of the people whom we can never repay. As a result, today 71 percent of our population lives within 5 kilometers of a health facility – up from 41 percent in 2006; today we have 550 health facilities – a 36 percent increase from six years ago. And all of our 15 counties now have at least one medical doctor. This has been achieved through partnerships with friendly governments, universities like yours, non-profit and church organizations. We are also investing in the potential of our people by training them to assume responsibility for health sector delivery.

Yet, the progress indicators of interactive operations can sometimes lead to frustration. For example, late last month, *The Economist* published figures which indicated that Liberia's infant mortality had increased. That came not only as a shock to me, but indicates great hurt because, in those numbers, I see families torn by grief, I see dreams and hopes dashed as life ebbs out of children. Where I come from, we deal with the reality of killer diseases that prey on children – the weakest among us – diseases such as malaria and dysentery that have long since disappeared from other parts of the world.

What we came to realize is that the numbers were not so much going up as our reporting mechanisms were improving. After two decades of no accurate data on the state of our health sector, we began collecting information. We conducted a National Census, and improved data collection and reporting exposed the extent of our problems. As difficult as it is to face these numbers, it was a necessary first step toward improving the quality of life of our people. Yet, the realities are there and they remain shocking. Although down from 26 percent, 16 percent of our children die at birth, and some 700 of 100,000 mothers also die giving birth.

The next step comes from better education in all of those remedies: the use of bed nets, and better practices in accessing clean water and sanitation. This also means addressing the practices of traditional birth attendants who require better training and appropriate use of the referral system.

It is thus important to remember that the high points of our lives have no reference without the low points. It is impossible to understand our present without an appreciation for our past, and our history is a combination of where we succeeded and where we failed. We pay the greatest respect to the past by avoiding its mistakes; some people call that wisdom.

As you may have gathered by now, while my country has a long way to go, it has, inarguably, come from an even longer way. We are investing in the potential of our people, formulating the road map, and establishing the processes, systems and institutions that will allow us to reach our ambitious goal of becoming a middle-income country by the year 2030. We are pleased to have been recognized and received praise, as Liberia is today considered a model of how a failed state can be restored to the family of nations. I am also pleased to say that Liberia is an open society, where our laws ensure no discrimination against anyone.

However, these achievements only make sense against the background of our previous, colossal failures. Everything we have done right is polar opposite of what we did wrong in the preceding decades.

On this, here's a thought I wish to leave with you: Failure matters. Oftentimes, success comes through the experience of failure. Failure matters not only in the lessons we learn from them, but in the options they close off and what they tell us about ourselves.

As human beings, we spend our lives avoiding the past or attempting to relive it. Those who pursue success must also be familiar with failure. Success blinds us to the struggles that came before. Sometimes in the wake of my relative success, people forget how I got there. Where I am today, and who I have become, was not always a foregone conclusion. My life has had its peaks and its valleys. Today I am President; yesterday, I was a prisoner forced into exile.

I was not always certain how each episode would end, but I never gave up. Uncertainty is crucial to the human condition; some of the most important decisions occur in moments of great uncertainty. To be without doubt is to escape an inevitable human limitation. To maintain a healthy skepticism is a virtue, even about the ideas in which you strongly believe. But whatever the circumstances, we must have the courage to be brave in action.

CONCLUSION

Graduates of 2012: You have come further than most people will in a lifetime. Cherish that accomplishment. Today, take a break from your journey and celebrate. Tomorrow, it will be time to begin another phase, another stage, in preparation for another rite of passage.

As you graduate and go forth into the world, use your knowledge and skills. Continue to make a difference, for that is your calling. Along the road, remember to protect the big picture, because your sense of purpose and meaning is bound to matter. As I always say to graduates, seek at all times to preserve what is best about humanity and reduce what is worst among us. As doctors, I know that each of you has read Atul Gawande's *The Checklist Manifesto*, which helps you in your profession, medical or otherwise, to avoid mistakes.

Class of 2012: Go out and save the world!

Congratulations!