

2020 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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“Pearls During a Pandemic”

Thank you to President Kelly, Provost Danilowicz, Dean Boiselle, members of the administration, fellow faculty members, and the Student Advisory Committee, as I am honored to be this year’s recipient of the Distinguished Teacher of the Year award, representing the College of Medicine. I am a physician, and my specialty is Internal Medicine, a specialty dealing with the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of diseases of the adult patient. Ironically enough, one such disease, called COVID-19, is preventing us from being able to congregate together in person at the Honors Convocation. While I’m under no pretense that my orally recited speech would be transformative to you in any way, I’m hoping that I can still leave you, as a reader, with some pearls during this pandemic. I should explain that in medical education, we use the word pearl to represent “small bits of free standing, clinically relevant information based on experience or observation. They are part of the vast domain of experience-based medicine and can be helpful in dealing with clinical problems for which controlled data do not exist (1).” I’m constantly bringing up pearls with my students, both for their standardized tests and for clinical practice. I’ll refrain from making the following pearls clinical, but I hope that they’re helpful for you, nonetheless.

My first pearl, which I typically reserve for my most high-achieving students and therefore I think is very applicable to this audience, is to always stay hungry. Not for food (which could also describe me), but for both knowledge and opportunity. This is more than just the trite “work hard” or “do your best” advice that circulates from well-meaning advisors. This pearl, like a natural pearl found in oysters, comes from a place of grit. Your appetite for self-improvement shouldn’t stop with college, graduate school, or even once you land your dream job. You can never stop learning about your field, your classmates, your colleagues, or

yourself. If you're given the opportunity for a research or work project that makes you uncomfortable, take it. It's often these opportunities that will provide the most growth, both personally and professionally. When I first started here at FAU several years ago, I joined my national academic organization (the Alliance for Academic Internal Medicine) and responded to a posting on the list serve asking if anyone was interested in a research project examining characteristics of Internal Medicine clerkships and standardized examination scores. Honestly, I only signed up because it sounded cool, and because the person posting it was from Loyola University, in my hometown of Chicago. Fast forward 5 years and we have recently received word that our work will be published in the premier journal of medical education, *Academic Medicine*. In addition, that colleague who originally posted to the list serve has now become a Vice Chair of Faculty Development and offered to mentor me within our national organization. Staying hungry to improve my knowledge base and take advantage of any opportunities that might come my way has definitely helped me advance my career and become a better teacher. It also leads to my second pearl however, one that came to mind after telling the Student Advisory Committee a story about the chaos of my home with 3 young children. The Committee then asked me a question along the lines of, "How do you balance it all, being a teacher, scholar, parent... everything?"

My second pearl is that there IS no such thing as balance. This is a good pill to swallow early on in your career, so that you can appropriately manage your expectations. One of my first mentors, the program director of my Internal Medicine residency program, Dr. Suzanne Kraemer, originally shattered my naïve idea of "balance" when it comes to career, family life, and marriage. A successful female physician, wife, and mother herself, she gave me the metaphor of a circus performer spinning plates on sticks. Each plate represents an aspect of your life: career, marriage, children, extended family, etc. You'll never have all of the plates spinning equally and perfectly using some "hippie-like" vision (her words, not mine) of putting equal efforts into each area. Instead, these plates will teeter and spin at different speeds, occasionally slowing down and coming dangerously close to crashing down, only for you to run to that plate, devote more attention to it at the expense of the other plates, and spin it faster and faster, in an attempt to get it back up to speed. You'll continue to move from plate to plate throughout life, sometimes devoting more attention to your career, and sometimes more attention to family. There's no perfect equation for how much time to devote to

each area, and therefore, no true balance. A few months after my third child was born, I had the amazing opportunity to attend a health professions educator course at Harvard Medical School. It required being in Boston for 10 days in the dead of winter (soon after a blizzard) as well as another 5 days a few months later. While it was extremely difficult to be away from my family for so long, I had a LOT of help, and was able to attend this amazing professional development conference that was so formative for my career. This leads to my final pearl...

Don't be afraid to ask for help, and remember to then thank those people who have helped you along the way. My mother, who has believed in me from the start, was a single mom who at one point worked 2 jobs, 7 days a week just so me and my two siblings could survive. As soon as we were financially able, my husband and I asked her to retire early and move down to Florida to live with us and help us with our kids. She now spends her days playing tennis, attending book clubs, enjoying the sunshine, and she picks my kids up from school so that I can work full-time, not worrying about where my kids are or who's taking care of them. I'd never be where I am now without her. So, Mom, thank you. My husband is another one of these people. I will slyly add a bonus pearl in here and advise you to choose a partner who's just that – an equal, a true partner, someone who makes you want to be the best version of yourself, who believes in you more than you believe in yourself; a true “ride or die.” That's what my husband is for me. When my career plate demands a bit more spinning, my husband is willing to step in, change diapers, help with homework, and cook dinner... and he never makes me feel guilty about any of this. So, Keith, thank you, I love you so much! I've also been blessed to have several mentors throughout my career, people I look up to as titans in Internal Medicine, medical education, and medical research. So, to Drs. Suzanne Kraemer, Jose Muniz, Darby Sider, Stuart Markowitz, Joanna Drowos, Sarah Wood, and Charles Hennekens, thank you, from the bottom of my heart, as this award belongs as much to all of you as it does to me.

I regret that I can't deliver this speech in front of you all due to the current pandemic, but I think we can all use this socially distanced time to reflect on these pearls. What are you hungry for? Study that topic or dive into that research project, as safely as you can right now, to feed your personal and professional growth. What plates are in danger of falling at the moment? Maybe you can devote a bit of attention to that area, whether it be career, family, or specific

relationships, to keep them spinning. And finally, who has helped you get to this point? You may not be able to visit them face to face, but connect with them, and thank them. To that end, I'd like to thank my colleagues at the College of Medicine who inspire me every day and make our work fun. I'd also like to thank my students, for nominating me for this award. I am so grateful for the opportunity to help you turn your grit into pearls on your journey to becoming a physician.

References:

1. Lorin MI, Palazzi DL, Turner TL, Ward MA. What is a clinical pearl and what is its role in medical education? *Med Teach*. 2008;30(9-10):870-4.