

TODAY COULD BE THE DAY

“When as kids we came to an orchard wall that seemed too high to climb, we took off our caps and tossed them over the wall, and then we had no choice but to follow them. I had tossed my cap over the wall of life, and I knew I must follow it, wherever it had fallen.”

These words are Frank O’Connor’s, an Irish man of letters whose autobiography, *An Only Child*, was quoted by President Kennedy, the day before he died, at the opening of the Aerospace Medical Center at Brooks Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. The president spoke about the importance of medical research, commenting that the United States, given its place in the world, should be a leader in research, second to none, particularly as the nation began its exploration of space.

As he concluded his speech, the president referenced Mr. O’Connor’s passage:

“Two intrepid Irish boys used to spend their days exploring the rolling countryside.

“One day, the boys came upon a high wall that guarded an orchard and blocking their path. It seemed impassable. For a moment, they considered turning back and ending their journey. Then, in a flash of unspoken agreement, they took their caps off their heads and flung them over the impassable wall. Now they had no choice but to continue.”

In San Antonio that day, President Kennedy observed that our nation had “tossed its cap” and now must explore outer space. He went on to comment that medical research in space would yield benefits for medical care at home. It was quite a time.

The Academic Year Begins

Good afternoon. It remains a distinct privilege to welcome all of you to this Convocation ceremony as we begin this new academic year. Let me add a special welcome to those whose generosity allows us to fulfill our mission in ways not imagined nearly fifty years ago when our university was becoming of age.

So too, it is wonderful to be joined by our students; your idealism and commitment to the future of medicine inspires each of us as we fulfill the high calling to educate those who come behind us in our respective professions. This year we welcome the largest class in the medical school’s history and we establish the Brightwood Learning Community at our new Baystate regional campus that has admitted its first students to the Population-based Urban and Rural Community Health track.

We are fortunate that many of our faculty join with us in this celebration of all that is great with our health sciences university. It is wonderful that our new full professors and those who were tenured within this past year join with us today. The faculty is the heart and soul of a university and this university is fortunate that our committed faculty is engaged, collegial, and collaborative.

As we embark upon a new year, we are encouraged by the many accomplishments of the year we have just ended. Later today and this evening, we will invest nine new endowed professors. We are fortunate that generous donors and talented faculty continue to come together, this year in large numbers, as principled stewards of precious resources.

Through the efforts of our entire community, we focused this year on diversity. I am grateful to the members of the Executive Council, particularly its Ad Hoc Work Group on Underrepresented Minorities in Academic Health Sciences; the leadership of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion; and to all those who have come together to assert our commitment to diversity. The summits we have conducted, the reviews we have summarized and the plans we are now implementing shall serve our community well and reinforce for all of us the importance of diversity within our midst.

Our colleagues at MassBiologics and Commonwealth Medicine have had extraordinary years.

In Fall River, MassBiologics has established scalable processes for manufacturing recombinant adeno-associated viral vector products using current good manufacturing practices. Furthermore, there has been increased production and sales of tetanus and diphtheria vaccine as well a significant increase in contract manufacturing activity.

Commonwealth Medicine has continued its commitment to our commonwealth and our medical school while responding to those in need of special services through its activities that have resulted in savings or reduced expenditures, this year nearing the \$6 billion mark.

Our Pathways of Promise Comprehensive Campaign has entered its public phase and nears the \$200 million milestone as we partner with donors to bring much-needed funds to the institution in support of research, teaching and learning, and community and global health.

The innovation and business development efforts of our faculty have sparked discovery and innovation and led to the creation of several new companies that focus on the novel ideas that emanate from our laboratories and support the economic development of our region.

In so many ways, we have tossed our caps over the wall and in search of them have made discoveries that shall change the course of history of disease.

An important moment of each Convocation ceremony is the recognition of faculty who have made extraordinary contributions to our university. So too, this year we take this moment at the beginning of the academic year to bring note to members of our extraordinary faculty.

As teaching remains at the heart of our institution, we shall begin the medal ceremony with the medal for distinguished teaching.

Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Teaching

In describing this year's medal recipient, those who commented on this professor's teaching abilities described "genuine gifts," "a new gold standard," "creativity," "passion," "excitement," "tireless commitment," "masterful" efforts and "inspiration." There was thoughtful emotion and sincere appreciation expressed by many who have benefited from the commitment of this master teacher. It is a distinct privilege to recognize one who has contributed mightily, over several decades, to the education of students and colleagues alike, this year's recipient of the Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Teaching, Anne Gilroy.

Professor Gilroy, for 28 years, you have taught anatomy to our medical students. But your contributions to the education of our learners extend far beyond that one course and the borders of our campus. In fact, you have been described as an "institution within an institution," high praise for one who has been consistently recognized for your many efforts to facilitate the learning of anatomy for so many within our community and beyond.

Your textbook and atlas of anatomy are renowned the world over, actually described as bringing "miracles" to learning by some who have used them to master your art. In fact, much like a talented painter, you bring focus and clarity to a subject that revels in the beauty of the body and reveals its intricacies only through a mastery facilitated by great teaching.

In your commentary on teaching, entitled "One Teacher's Perspective," you comment that, "Teaching is a complicated profession, frequently underappreciated and largely misunderstood, but inexplicably rewarding. It is a learning experience in itself, offering equal parts of pride, humility and passion." Further, you comment that, "Most successful educational endeavors are really partnerships of synergistic energies. Whatever the subject, whoever the participants, and regardless of the pedagogy employed, education is best accomplished as the product of reciprocal expectations and shared effort."

You are prescient in your observation and practice.

Your shared effort has brought understanding of anatomy to thousands of learners the world over. On our campus, in partnership with colleagues in Liberia, through your learning tools and now, engaged at the Anatomage table, you have ignited the learning of so many, stimulated their curiosity for the inner workings of the human body and fostered love for both the science and art of anatomy.

For this you have been recognized by students and colleagues alike with numerous recognitions for your outstanding commitment to the education of so many.

As the recipient of this recognition, later this year, you shall receive the Manning Prize, a \$10,000 gift made possible through the generosity of UMass Board Chair Robert Manning and his wife Donna. Also, I invite you to present this year's Last Lecture. At this celebration of teaching, all of us look forward to becoming your learners.

Please join me in recognizing this year's recipient of the Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Teaching, Anne Gilroy.

Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Research

Research brings hope to the human condition. At our great institution, we are fortunate to have committed and collegial investigators who care deeply about science and the potential to unlock cures for disease. We celebrate the intricacies of basic science and we applaud efforts to apply discovery to translational efforts to change the course of the history of disease. Our commitment to research defines UMass Medical School; the intellect and ingenuity of our faculty enable innovation; ultimately, patients are the beneficiaries of these extraordinary efforts. This is a high calling.

In an institution with such a tremendous cadre of committed investigators, it is most difficult to select but one for recognition. This year, we recognize a member of our community who defines seriousness of purpose, espouses modesty, embraces humility and exemplifies all that is great about academic medicine. It is a distinct privilege to recognize a cherished colleague whose heart and mind bring extraordinary commitment to scientific inquiry and to those for whom it is a privilege to bring hope when they are most in need, Robert H. Brown, Jr.

Doctor Brown, as a clinician-investigator, the impact and significance of your work is known throughout the world. In fact, you have been described as “the world’s leader in ALS research,” having made seminal discoveries in this field of inquiry. Your “laboratory was responsible for the discovery of mutations in SOD1 as a cause of familial ALS; this set the stage for remarkably fruitful work uncovering other genes that contribute to ALS and ALS overlap syndromes.”

“What is most impressive is that after discovering these mutations, you have gone on to develop a deeper understanding of the mutation’s biology, and now are developing two gene therapy strategies to silence the production of toxic RNA and proteins from the mutant gene C9orf72, the most common cause of inherited ALS.”

You have contributed over 300 original publications to the literature, including “playing an important role in the discovery of dystrophin,” the protein deficient in Duchenne muscular dystrophy and the first of several thousand human disease genes to be found by positional cloning; and your group identified dysferlin as a disease product in limb girdle muscular dystrophy.

As you work now to apply this knowledge to create trials of therapies to disrupt or cure these diseases, you apply your knowledge with compassion and caring that is the hallmark of a great physician. You continue to show “an amazing ability as a mentor to inspire numerous trainees from around the world, in scholarly pursuit of research and clinical advances.” It has been stated that, “You are the most accomplished neurologist of [your] generation... and the most inspiring human being,” high praise for one who represents all that is great about our profession.

Bob, as recipient of this recognition, I invite you to present this year’s plenary lecture at our research retreat.

Please join me in recognizing this year’s recipient of the Chancellor’s Medal for Distinguished Research, Robert Brown.

Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Clinical Excellence

The Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Clinical Excellence is presented each year to a clinician who has made extraordinary commitments to patients. This recognition celebrates a career-long excellence in patient care as the recipient serves as a role model for all that is great about the professions who commit to patient care and well-being.

This year's recipient has a distinguished career of outstanding clinical expertise, described by patients as "assuring," as "possessing a keen sense for listening," as "trusted and compassionate" and as "possessing a gentle smile" with a "calm demeanor." It is a special privilege to recognize this year's recipient of the Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Clinical Excellence, Robert Quinlan.

Doctor Quinlan, as a surgical oncologist who, for decades, has cared for the needs of women with cancer, you are "widely known and respected across the region" for your abilities to care for and about your patients. Your surgical expertise, when combined with a uniquely caring and personal touch, has brought calm and confidence to patients and family alike. Your career-long commitment to this community and its patients has wielded an influence like few others.

When you began your "practice as a dedicated breast surgeon, you saw the value of creating a breast center in order to better meet the needs of women who were suffering from this cancer." "As a strong advocate for our patients' participation in national clinical trials, you became a co-investigator in the NSAPB B-06 clinical trial which became the most influential randomized prospective trial in breast cancer surgery, as it firmly established that lumpectomy plus radiation was equivalent to total mastectomy for early stage breast cancer." Further, [you had] "the largest single surgeon recruitment to the NSABP B-32 Trial" which "validated sentinel node surgery as offering similar results to axillary node dissection." This trial was practice changing for all breast cancer surgeons across the country and life changing for our patients. It remains the single most important surgical clinical trial in recent history."

In your personal statement, you comment that your "philosophy of clinical care was guided by a passion for commitment to caring for one patient at a time, commitment to lifelong learning, teamwork, and mentorship in a big tent of active listening and respectful, informed communication among all health care workers." Indeed, you "have been blessed by [your] patients, given excitement to our students and residents, and given hope by our strong research community."

Bob, your patients have commented that yours is a "matchless reputation in our community and our region. In every way, [you have] modeled the role of an expert and busy clinician to our students and residents, while being a teacher and a consummate gentleman." You are beloved and trusted by your patients; you are respected and valued by your colleagues; you are genuine and comforting.

As the recipient of this year's medal in clinical excellence, I invite you to address our first year students and their families at next year's White Coat ceremony. This is fitting recognition for one who has done such great credit to the caring professions.

Please join me in recognizing this year's recipient of the Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Clinical Excellence, Robert Quinlan.

Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Service

The Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Service recognizes an individual who has made sentinel contributions to our campus community and beyond during a career that is distinct in its service commitment and the broader needs of our society.

This year's recipient is distinguished in so many ways. An accomplished educator and clinician, our recipient is "an outstanding physician and a beloved teacher who has inspired students and residents." The recipient is a role model, a committed advocate, a dedicated mentor, a humanist, and a "true Renaissance physician whose passion for being a clinician and for community health permeates everything." Thus, it is a distinct privilege to present this year's Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Service to Michael Hirsh.

Doctor Hirsh, you have been described as "a role model for not just the science of surgery and the art of medicine but [also for] the humanistic qualities of being a physician, focusing on what is best for the patient and understanding how public health affects the human condition of individuals and the community." In our community, you have consistently shown interest in the health and wellbeing of those with whom we share our neighborhoods.

From your earliest days as a resident, you have been concerned about gun violence and have worked to remove thousands of guns from the hands of those who could do harm, especially children. You have led an effort to "build Mobile Safety Street, a mobile, interactive, hands-on injury prevention exhibit, which has visited Worcester public elementary schools and Head Start programs since 2008." You have championed efforts to create safe driving programs through Teen Drive. You have served as president of the Injury Free Coalition for Kids and as the medical director for the City of Worcester Division of Public Health, "leading the department to become the first nationally accredited public health department in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts."

In your efforts to educate us all, you remind us regularly not to use the word "accident" as "injuries are not accidents; most often, they are preventable [occurrences]."

You have represented our medical school and the medical profession well through your service to the Worcester District Medical Society, holding nearly every elected position and through an extraordinary three years of service as president.

It has been said that Doctor Hirsh's "secret for being a revered teacher and public health advocate is no secret at all; he treats his patients, his residents and students and his community coworkers with respect and as colleagues, and in so doing, models the art of being a holistic physician and person who demonstrates knowledge and generosity of spirit as he inspires those around him."

Michael, yours has been a life and career well lived in service to others. In recognition of your outstanding contributions and service, it is my privilege to invite you to carry the University mace at all official functions in the year ahead. While so doing, we shall be able to recognize you for all that you have meant for us.

Please join me in recognizing this year's recipient of the Chancellor's Medal for Distinguished Service, Michael Hirsh.

The Horizon – Bright Skies or Dark Clouds

In the days ahead, we must consider some of the external challenges that impact our midst.

It is not possible to be so committed to science, discovery and health care and not be concerned by the headlines that herald reduced research funding or abandonment of measures of health care reform.

So too, our community has come together to support certain immigrants who, some may claim, should not be among us. We confirm boldly that ours is a global talent pool and that we shall continue to welcome the best and the brightest minds and the biggest and boldest dreamers to our campus. No wall should be too steep for their tossed hats. Our mission should not be impeded by artificial barriers; as only with keen intellect and unbridled ingenuity shall we succeed with our commitments to teach, discover and care.

While external public funding remains limited, we have acted to assure that our university shall operate with positive financial margins, adequate cash and secure reserves. I am grateful that we have come together as a community and recognize that with prudent action and coordinated planning, we can realize a certain and sustainable financial future.

In so many ways in these uncertain times, our health sciences university is a bedrock of stability. We do not waver about our mission. We do not rely on others to solve our issues. We do not cower at the enormity of the challenges we face to discover cures, and attract and educate the next generation of learners. And we do not manage results for a better next quarter, we manage with an intense focus for a most ambitious future.

Let us Toss Our Cap

Institutions have their moments and each of us and our institution must look to this moment as our moment.

At UMass Medical School, there's a generosity of spirit extant in our community. Our actions and promise do not occur in isolation but are interrelated for the benefit of others.

The open and collaborative culture at our medical school is quite rare in higher education, rarer still at medical institutions. We experience a dynamic combination of smart minds, great science and genuine collegiality that sets us apart. We do not need to be encouraged or forced to work together—we want to.

Our unique culture catalyzes surprising and seminal advancements, including a Nobel Prize and a Breakthrough Prize; the highest medical student satisfaction among American medical schools five years running; and innovative health care delivery enterprises across our clinical partners, all making us a place that is highly rated and deeply admired by leading scientists, health leaders and educators around the world.

Working together defines how we advance medical education, biomedical research, human health and community engagement. Intentional and serendipitous interactions spark new ways of solving what once was considered unsolvable.

Scientists from across the globe know that our pioneering, curious, and friendly environment is conducive to tackling some of the biggest mysteries in medicine, advancements in science and learning in classrooms and clinical settings.

UMass Medical School has quietly become the emblem of the next generation global medical school, making our mark. We are a proven solid investment and an economic engine for an entire region. If something gets in the way of life-changing work and educational excellence, we change it. Not in months or years, but now. Our work is too important to do otherwise.

Each day on our campus starts with a sense of purpose and possibility. Something momentous or unexpected could happen that makes a difference in the lives of one person or entire populations. There's an undercurrent of anticipation and muted excitement with our students, scientists, faculty and staff as they go about their research, teaching and global service. We are united by a common calling, bold in our ambitions, confident in our abilities and serious in our purpose.

There's no limit to the strides of our institution and what can be done, starting today.

We have come to realize that today could be the day.

We have tossed our caps and are following pathways of promise that will engage our learners, scientists, practitioners, supporters and colleagues. Our institution's culture of collaboration, reinforced by the high calling of our mission and professional oaths is one of our greatest strengths.

When caring for a patient, educating a learner or pursuing a novel pathway, the promise of our ethical commitments directs the work of our hands and inspires the kindness in our hearts. These points of intersection afford us with unique opportunities to advance medical education, biomedical research, human health and community engagement in myriad ways from basic science through clinical translation to population health.

Today Could Be the Day

The young boys who walked down the Irish street made the decision to toss their hats together. So too, we choose to face our future infused with collegiality and collaboration.

As we look to the future, ours must become an academy of innovation. The learners of tomorrow may see books as adjuncts to learning of the past. Our educational endeavors will need to focus on learners who approach their studies with talents that may not be possessed by their faculty. Technology and on-line education will play an increasingly important role in the process of learning. The classroom may have its moments but it will be darkened if we choose to teach in large numbers. The learners who enter this fall will graduate in the '20s, many at the mid to latter years of that decade. Today could be the day that we recognize the need to augment our curricular offerings to assure that our faculty and teaching methods remain relevant and at the leading edge of educational methodologies.

In many ways, the concentration of our research commitments adds great distinction to our university. The RNA Therapeutics Institute; the Horae Gene Therapy Center; our NeuroNexis Institute; MassTeri; our Cardiovascular, Diabetes, Cancer and Musculoskeletal Centers of Excellence; our commitments to quantitative health sciences, systems biology and bioinformatics; and our global health Initiatives all represent research points of distinction for this health sciences university. Together with colleagues throughout the University of Massachusetts system, we have the opportunity to attract public funding, private investment and philanthropic dollars to resolve scientific problems that have appeared unsolvable, even in recent years.

Our research efforts have a unique focus on translating brilliant ideas that emanate at the bench into cures that will benefit populations of patients. Without hope, patients cannot face their tomorrows. With hope, even if that hope benefits future generations, patients embrace their future.

Today could be the day that discoveries in our labs change the course of the history of a patient's disease. Today could be the day when scientific discovery becomes the great equalizer to disease. Today could be the day when John Doe's disease becomes ours, or our child's, or our mother's. With our high purpose and calling, we fulfill our covenant to those for whom it is our privilege to care and fulfill the enormous promise and expectation that rests on the shoulders of a great public medical school.

With many diseases and with many patient stories, we know how the last chapter ends. The commitments that we make each and every day to educate learners; to foster discovery and innovation; and to care for those most in need, are all about rewriting last chapters. RNAi, AAV, CAR T cells, MABs and the microbiome are all authors that could change last chapters. Today could be their day.

Today Could Be the Day We Toss Our Cap

As each of us at this medical school walks the corridors and streets of our campus, we should be free to toss our cap and discover a world that is beyond our current expectations. As fantasy-like as that may seem, all pioneers and explorers have been willing to do so and so should we.

Like Anne Gilroy, as we toss our cap we can define the ideal education for our learners. Today could be the day.

Like Bob Brown, we can toss our cap and discover the cure for a debilitating disease and while so doing, engage in unprecedented collaboration with colleagues across the university. Today could be the day.

Like Bob Quinlan, we can care for those in need with novel approaches and intense commitment and in so doing, recognize the privilege it is to care for another. Today could be the day.

Like Mike Hirsh, we can improve the lives of populations, especially children, all the while committing selflessly to others. Today could be the day.

President Kennedy recognized the importance of research to our nation's commitment to explore outer space. It was an extraordinary time of national commitment and pride.

With resolve, our nation recognized the difficulties inherent in travel to the moon, and we did.

With our resolve, we recognize the difficulties inherent in curing disease. Together, we will.

Today could be the day.