

Dr. Sayed Amjad Hussain
Speaker for the Morning Commencement Exercises

Dr. Hussain is professor emeritus of thoracic and cardiovascular surgery at The University of Toledo College of Medicine. He has published more than 50 papers in American and international medical journals, given nearly 80 lectures, and invented two surgical devices. He also writes an op-ed column for The Toledo Blade.

Since 1976, Dr. Hussain has visited Pakistan annually to teach at Khyber Medical College in Peshawar. He has been a visiting professor at the Post Graduate Medical Institute in Peshawar, the King Edward Medical College in Lahore, Benghazi University in Libya, the University of Kentucky, and the Government Medical College in Amirsar, India.

Among his unique endeavors is exploring the 2,000-mile Indus River in Pakistan. Dr. Hussain founded the Team Indus exploration group in 1986, and the team members subsequently covered the entire length of the river during three expeditions. In 1996, Dr. Hussain and his team were the third expedition ever to explore the source of the Indus River at Mount Kailas in western Tibet.

Dr. Hussain has taken on leadership roles in numerous organizations in the greater Toledo community. He has served as president of the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo, the Association of Pakistani Physicians of North America, the Toledo Surgical Society, and the Academy of Medicine of Toledo.

Commencement Address UT

S. Amjad Hussain
May 6, 2007

Thank you Mr. Stansley for your very kind and generous introduction.
President Jacobs
Members of the Board of Trustees
Provost Rob Sheehan
Provost Jeff Gold
Deans
Members of the Platform Party
Fellow Faculty Members,
Parents, friends and colleagues
AND
The Graduates

I am very honored and extremely grateful for your kind invitation to be the commencement speaker this morning.

It is delightful to look at the sea of colorful robes and regalia and see the beaming smiles of proud families and friends who are part of this very important rite of passage in your life. Parents, grandparents, spouses and siblings are ever so eager to observe and record this important milestone. I know the feeling for I have also been there.

This scene reminds me of the time when a proud father strategically positioned himself near the stage to snap a picture of his daughter receiving her coveted diploma. Just as the young lady was to about to come on stage another father got in front of him and obstructed the view. The man tapped the intruder on the shoulder and said, could you please get out of the way. I have spent \$120,000 of my hard-earned money to get this picture.

With your indulgence I wish to interject a personal note at this juncture. This morning I miss the presence of two very special women in my life. Had they been alive they would have felt a measure of pride and satisfaction that only a mother and a wife can feel on such occasions.

My mother was a woman of sharp intellect, wit and uncommon wisdom who made sure her children received the education that she was deprived of as a child and as a young woman.

The other woman was Dottie, my wife and soul mate of 38-years and a nurse par excellence. These two women touched my life and my being in the most positive way with their quiet grace and their unfailing support of whatever I chose to peruse in my life.

(I am grateful to the University of Toledo-College of Nursing for accepting my family's offer to start a Distinguished Visiting Lectureship in her honor. Thank you Dean Milstead and Vern Snyder for your kindness)

I dedicate this address to the loving memory of those two women.

Commencement address is a wonderfully redundant exercise where a speaker stands between the graduates and their degrees and causes unnecessary delay in the subsequent celebration that the families and friends have been planning on this occasion. In this frame of mind you will soon forget the person who spoke at your graduation and also you will not remember much of what was said.

This was brought home to me rather vividly a number of years ago when I met this young and smart critical care nurse at St. Charles Mercy Hospital here in Toledo. She had recently graduated from Mercy College of Nursing where I was the commencement speaker at her graduation. I much excitement I asked her if she remembered the person who gave the commencement address. She said she did not. And neither did she remember if the speaker had said anything worth remembering. I was too embarrassed to tell her the truth.

So you see I am very cognizant of the transitory and fleeting nature of this exercise. I am mindful to be short, brief, interesting and perhaps amusing. It is a tall order and is not unlike when a 6th grade teacher gave her class the assignment to write a short essay which should incorporate the elements of religion, royalty, intrigue, suspense and drama. One young girl came up with a perfect example. She wrote:

OH MY GOD, THE QUEEN IS PREGNANT. I WONDER WHO'S DONE IT.

So I beg your indulgence as in the next fifteen minutes or so I share with you my observations and my perspective as an immigrant to this country and tell you that as members of this society and as members of a broader global community your ideas are important. They are important to tackle myriad challenges we face at home and abroad. And that you have a voice to articulate those ideas. My purpose this morning is to encourage you to use your voice to make this world a better place.

My journey from the dusty little town of Peshawar located at the crossroads of Asia near the famous Khyber Pass in northwestern Pakistan to the city of Toledo in 1963 did not look too significant at the moment. I left home, as most young men and women do on such occasions, with a heavy heart and a rich album of memories for the new world. I fully intended to return to my roots to pursue an academic career in surgery.

At the time I had thought that my future and my destiny lay in the land of my ancestors. I had naively assumed that seemingly sharp and impenetrable barriers of culture, religion and language separated me and my people from the people of the West. To put it in proper perspective it was barely 16 years after the independence of India and the creation of Pakistan that I left home for America. The memories of a mildly benevolent but still an apartheid British rule over India were still fresh in my mind. There were lines that we natives dare not cross. We, very simply, did not have a voice. So with that heavy baggage and lots of preconceived ideas about America I got off the boat, figuratively, 44 years ago.

Immigrants to a different culture follow one of the three paths while trying to adjust to a new life in a strange land.

Some of them spin a cocoon around them and live in that cocoon surrounded by comforting sounds and smells of a land they left behind. By living in isolation from the society, they end up living in a physical and psychological ghetto. The history of the first generation immigrants to this country is replete with such examples. It takes a few generations to break through the cocoons.

Then there are those on the other extreme who soon after coming to the West dive head on into the avant-garde culture prevalent in the West, which, incidentally is alien to many Americans. They emerge from this cultural baptism as new persons, cleansed of their past. Unfortunately such baptism does not change the color of skin, facial features or the foreign accent.

There is however a third choice, a difficult one I must admit, and that is to integrate with the host society and act as a bridge of understanding and a voice of reason between two disparate worlds. I have followed that path of integration as a South Asian Muslim. I did not find my religion or my cultural underpinnings to be contradictory to the idealism of America. It took me some time however to appreciate the full thrust of what it means to be an American even if I am what you will refer to as an hyphenated American.

I have been the recipient of grace, generosity and kindness by the people of my adopted land. I have received more than what I have given. A sense of justice in appreciation of one's ability has been the hallmark of this country. This is something that is uniquely American and is hard to find in the rest of the world; certainly not in Asia and not in Europe.

Perhaps it is because this is a country of immigrants. Except for the Native Americans, we all came here from someplace else. Some of you arrived on the Mayflower and some of us a few hundreds years later by jetliners. And to this day people, drifting on rickety boats across the vast expanse of oceans or trekking the inhospitable Arizona desert, come to the shining city on the hill as John Winthrop the Governor of Massachusetts described America so eloquently in 1630. We all came without the certainty of today but with a definite promise of tomorrow.

The pursuit of happiness, according to The Declaration of Independence is an unalienable right. This was later echoed by Robert Louis Stevenson, 'There is no duty we undertake so much as the duty of being happy'. So what is happiness?

One could equate happiness with bulging shelves at the grocery store or seemingly unending lines of new cars at a car dealership. But to equate happiness with 19- brands of toilet paper or long isles of soft drinks in a grocery store is to demean the very concept of happiness and liberty and life and I dare say the true meaning of America. To me happiness is the ability to think freely and express freely without the fear of a midnight knock at the door.

All of us as citizens of this great country have unrestricted access to the Public Square where we are free to exercise our unalienable right to express our opinions no matter how weird, unpopular or unpalatable they might be. I prefer a noisy and boisterous public discourse over a maddening and deafening silence in the public arena.

For the past 25-years I have been writing for the *Blade*, our daily newspaper, and these past 13-years as a columnist on op-ed pages of the paper. Every two weeks I stand on my little soapbox and say whatever is on my mind. With such unprecedented privilege comes the responsibility to be fair, accurate civil and informative; sometimes critical, at times outrageous but never insulting or demeaning.

Within those boundaries I have tried to explain the events unfolding in parts of the world that may not be of interest or may not be well understood by many of my fellow citizens. One could say that I have tried to narrow the widening and yawning gap between the East

and the West and specifically between Eastern and Western religious traditions. It has not been a cakewalk. Rudyard Kipling, the irrepressible champion of the British Raj, had said:

Oh the East is East and the West is West and never the twine shall meet.

Since the fateful day of September 11, 2001 my task as an op-ed columnist has taken on new urgency because I see the tendency in some of my fellow citizens to blame the entire edifice of religion for the misdeeds of some of its adherents. It is like throwing the baby with the bath water.

Nine-Eleven destroyed much of the amity that Muslims had developed with other religions in America. More than that it has critically silenced a meaningful dialogue between Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

Islam is under attack for the misdeeds and horrific acts of certain groups who call themselves Muslims and claim their nefarious inspiration from the same sacred text that I have cherished and followed all my life. So when I hear a blanket condemnation of my religion, and for that matter any religion, by those who ought to know better, it affects the very inner core of my being as it would, I am sure, affect you if the roles were reversed.

Through out history man has invoked the name of God to wage war against others. Time, reason and tactics might be different but invoking the name of God remains constant. A poem from WWI illustrates this point rather eloquently. It was written by the English poet Siegfried Sassoon:

*God heard embattled nations sing and shout
'Gott strafe England!' and 'God save the king!'.
God this, God that and God the other thing-
'Good God!' said God, I've my work cut out!'.*

Like two huge tectonic plates Islam and Christianity have collided many times in history and the reverberations from this collision were felt far and near and to this day we see those fissures visible in as distant places as the Middle East, the Balkans and parts of Europe. And there are people with long memories who still live on those fault lines.

But there have also been times when Christians and Muslims and Jews rose above their religious differences and worked in harmony. From five centuries from 750 CE to 1258 CE, the period of history known as the golden age of Islamic civilization, one sees an unprecedented cooperation and collaboration between Muslims and non-Muslims. Together they spawned a dazzling explosion of arts and sciences in Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Spain and a few centuries later in India during the Mughal rule.

Looking at those accomplishments even through the fog and haze of present day distrust and paranoia they look dazzling. It was made possible only when there was active participation of all citizens of the realm and when all voices were heard-Muslims,

Christians and Jews and later Hindus in India- in the society. Pray, tell why the same religion that provided a milieu for such cooperation and collaboration is now being called the source of all evil in the world? No, there has not always been the clash of civilization as popularized by Samuel Huntington.

This leads us to the invariable question: What happened?

The simple answer is that colonization of the Arab and Muslim lands by the emerging European powers in the 15th century changed that dynamic.

In the post Colonial era in the Muslim and Arab lands a mindset has developed that tends to blame all their shortcomings on the effects of Colonization. Lost in this rhetoric is the fact that we the Muslims have also lost our intellectual and scholarly pursuit to be preeminent.

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam had famously said that the ink from the pen of a scholar is more sacred than the blood of martyr. In a macabre reversal of that noble saying, for some, the blood of a terrorist has become more sacred while our inkwells have run dry. Add to that the political injustices that have been meted out, from Palestine to Kashmir to Chechnya to Kosovo to Afghanistan and you have a perfect milieu for disenchantment, extremism and terrorism.

Now what, and the question begs for an answer, all this geopolitical turmoil has to do with you, the newly minted graduates of this university?

I respectfully submit that it does.

It would be an understatement to say that the world has changed and has become much smaller in the past 50-years. What happens in one corner of the world affects us all. But we have lagged behind in our approach to and understanding of the world that once used to be remote, distant and somewhat exotic. The world we used to access through the pages of the National Geographic or BBC Radio is no more. Now it is in the face, real life and in real time.

All of us are given choices in life. Many times the choices we make determine our destiny and our legacy. Those choices make the difference between a life spent in pursuit of happiness that is limited to the plethora of choices available in the grocery store and a life spent in pursuit of happiness in making the difference to others. According to Martin Luther King, "Every man must decide whether he will walk in the creative light of altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life's persistent and most urgent question is 'What are you doing for others?'"

There are many areas that would need your attention and I shall outline those areas briefly.

But before I do that I must tell you a fable from the East. In the bygone days the trade caravans from Central Asia and the plains of India use to pass through Peshawar, my hometown. During the stop over in the city professional storytellers entertained the weary

travelers. The main street in Peshawar is still called the Street of Story Tellers and hence my propensity to tell stories. This story has its usual inferences and morals.

Once upon a time, as the story goes, (I love that fairy tale beginning) there was a benevolent king whose beloved queen fell ill of a mysterious illness. Despite all efforts her health continued to decline. In desperation the royal physician suggested a milk bath. The king decreed that each household supply a pitcher of milk for the common good of the kingdom.

The town criers went through the labyrinthine streets of the city and announced that every household was to deliver a pitcher of milk to the royal bath outside the city gates.

All through the night residents of the city- peasants, artisans, professionals, traders and shopkeepers- carried clay pitchers full of precious liquid on their heads to the outskirts of the city to pour their contribution into the royal bath.

When the first light of morning dissipated the pitch darkness of the night the royal attendants to their horror saw that the bath was not full but with not milk but with water.

Every household had assumed that one pitcher of water in a bath full of milk would not be noticed and it would not make any difference.

It did.

And it still does.

I would like you to keep this story in mind when you go about making choices in your life and carve out a comfortable niche for you and your family.

There is enormous poverty and hunger in the world and even in this country there are pockets of deprivation. People are poor for no fault of theirs. When you are asked to extend a helping hand just remember the Queen's bath and do your part.

There will be times in your life when you will see injustice meted out to those who cannot defend themselves. You will be called upon to stand up for those disenfranchised segment of our society. You must share with them the milk from the proverbial pitcher.

You will also see bigotry and prejudice- may it be social, political or religious- towards your fellow citizens. You will be expected to stand up for them and if appropriate scream bloody murder. To look the other way would be like pouring water instead of milk in the bath.

Our communities are enriched with the presence of Community Theater, orchestra, boy and girl scouts, libraries and service clubs. As productive members of the community you will be asked to help out with these efforts. Just imagine if Libbeys, the Stranahans, the Knights, the Andersons and the like would have remained oblivious to the needs of the community. These big and small entities depend on the philanthropy of the community members. I hope you will do your bit.

All of you have worked extremely hard to earn the diploma that you are about to receive. This first rate education will open the world for you. But you have reached this milestone with the help of many people who helped you climb this difficult ladder. You ought to remember the fable of queen's illness and the pitcher of milk when you are asked to help your alma mater. America is great because of its institutions of higher learning and institutions thrive when alumni become part of their future.

Last but not the least you should also apply the parable of Queen's bath when it comes to your own family. Before the relentless pursuit of success takes you away from your primary responsibility as a son, daughter, husband, wife or as a parent do not forget that charity does begins at home. Your family would also need some of that milk.

Now I assure you it is not easy to balance a big, bottomless pitcher filled with the milk of human kindness and grace on your head and walk a tight rope of responsibilities the rest of your life. But then the ceremony you are about to participate in has, hopefully, prepared you for that difficult walk.

In the end the choice will have to be yours. To remain silent or oblivious should not be one of the choices.

In the words of 19th century American army general, poet and orator Albert Pike: What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal.

I wish you the world.