

DEAN AND CEO ROBERT I. GROSSMAN, M.D.

# IN TOUCH

*Last night, at the School of Medicine's 171st graduation, I shared some of my thoughts with our new graduates on overcoming adversity and the strength that comes from being committed to something larger than yourself. As this theme really applies to everyone, I wanted to share my speech with all of you as well.*

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

I'm so proud of you! And delighted to get to share with you this evening the culmination of all your effort and hard work.

I know that your families, friends and teachers are **at least** as proud of you as I am. And I'm sure you'd like to take this opportunity to stand and give them a round of applause for all the ways they've cheered you on.

By the end of this ceremony, you'll be holding in your hands tangible proof of all you've accomplished these past few years. Earning your degree in the same academic year that your School nearly **drowned** in 15 million gallons of contaminated water...is quite a distinction! I suspect it's given you memories and experiences unlike any others you'll ever forge...as well as bonds that you'll cherish, and draw strength from, for the rest of your lives.

For that very reason, I'd like this evening to share with you some reflections on the lessons we can take forward from the hurricane and its aftermath.

I guess it's only fair that I start by telling you what I learned about **myself**.

Even as the torrent of water was pouring into our Medical Center last October, I just **knew** we'd come out stronger.

Under the circumstances, it was almost eerie.

So eerie, in fact, that some people started calling me a "pathological optimist." (Though I guess that if you have to be afflicted with a pathology, that's not such a bad one to have!) And even more interesting—medically speaking, at least—was that my auditory cortex never registered one evoked potential from naysayers or pessimists.

At any rate, I've spent a lot of time since then thinking about where that immediate, absolute conviction came from, and why it never left me.

For one thing, I've always been a strong believer in the power of the human spirit.

In fact, last May, just after Commencement, I read a book so inspiring that I originally planned to talk to you at length about its implications this evening.

The book was *Unbroken*, by Laura Hillenbrand—the story of Olympic-level runner Louie Zamperini, whose plane went down not long after he'd joined the Army Air Corps in World War II...who spent 47 days on a tiny raft ...deprived of food and water... regularly attacked by sharks...strafed by enemy planes... only to be quote-unquote “rescued” at last ...by the enemy...and wound up imprisoned and subjected to medical experiments...vicious daily beatings...starvation...every conceivable form of humiliation and torture.

For two interminable years.

Yet somehow...Louie Zamperini...never...broke.

But as we all know, adversity doesn't always work that way. When disaster strikes, some people crumble. Some institutions fall apart.

The reason, I'd say, often has little to do with the magnitude of the crisis...and **everything** to do with what you're trying to salvage...and why.

In that sense, adversity is “the great revealer.” It brutally exposes, if I may say so, who is not wearing the bathing suit when the tide goes out.

Take Enron, for example.

Enron, as we all know, wasn't the victim of war...or natural disaster...or even economic misfortune. It imploded due to hubris and dishonesty.

The same could be said of any of our recent “anti-heroes” —like Bernie Madoff...John Edwards...or Lance Armstrong—people whose determination to preserve the fiction of their own “grandeur” apparently obliterated all concern for those they hurt along the way. In each case, it took a long time, but what ultimately caught up with them was their “pathological illusion”—their obsession with their own importance.

This leads to what, for me, is a pretty important conclusion: that—however paradoxical it may seem—it's self-serving goals like fame and power that make people vulnerable...even fragile.

What makes you “**anti**-fragile” —to borrow from the title of Nassim Nicholas Taleb's recent book—is your commitment to something larger than yourself.

These past months, we *lived* that. If our Medical Center was up and running and serving patients again on our main campus less than two months after the storm engulfed us, it's because people at all levels and in all functions gave the best that was in them.

And that happened because we weren't fighting for our own skins, we were fighting for our *purpose*.

We took advantage of the crisis to accelerate a lot of things we wouldn't have been able to do otherwise—we took the lemons we were dealt and made lemonade!

But if I had to choose the single greatest benefit we derived from the disaster, it was experiencing that sense of oneness in defense of a common cause. Like an athlete "in the moment" or oarsmen in a crew race, we were... "in the swing"...rowing in perfect unison as the boat "rises out of the water."

Practically without exception, there were no "egos"...no hierarchical posturing...no "turf." It was an indelible lesson of the strength that can derive from shared commitment to the greater good.

I tell you all this because I think it has bearing, not just on what you've lived this past year, but on your future.

I'd say the odds are about 100 to one that, if you haven't already, you'll encounter tough stuff at some point in your life. Maybe the challenge will be ethical. Or emotional. Or financial. Or physical. Hopefully only one of those...at least at a time!

That's precisely why it's so important to stay grounded...to remember at all times where your center of gravity lies—your true north. And to keep firmly anchored—pointed toward something bigger than yourself.

I don't think history offers a stronger illustration of what I mean than Abraham Lincoln.

Of course, Lincoln has been very "trendy" lately, what with the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation and the deservedly award-winning film.

But I suspect he's been back in the headlines above all because—with our world facing such seemingly intractable problems these days—his legacy reminds us just how much can be accomplished by someone of indomitable principle and true moral fortitude.

When the Civil War broke out, the United States was less than a century old. And because we somehow got through it, it's hard to remember sometimes how close we came to falling irreparably apart.

- The conflict was so unimaginably bloody that, by one calculation, it claimed the life of one person out of every 40 in the country. In today's terms, that would mean a death toll of **seven and a half million** people!
- The carnage of course provoked anger, fear and dwindling faith that saving the Union was worth the cost. The Emancipation Proclamation itself unleashed denunciation in the North...fury in the South...and condemnation from abroad (apparently for economic reasons—the supply of cotton)...all while Lincoln was still grieving the recent death of his 11-year-old son.

I wonder sometimes how even a quote-unquote “pathological optimist” (which as you know, Lincoln definitely was **not**) could hold up under conditions like those...

But he **did**...and did it magnificently, I might add!

Even when you consider Lincoln's ultimate fate...and even on the days it seems that some of the issues underlying the Civil War are still being fought...the fact that a single human being managed to preserve the ideals that gave birth to this country...and in fact, to align reality far closer to the founding principle that “all men are created equal”...well, it's mind-boggling. Don't you think?

In closing, let me just say this:

I hope that, going forward, you will never try to hide from adversity. As many of you learned from direct experience during Hurricane Sandy, it can teach you things about yourself...and other people...that you really can't learn any other way.

Confronting reality doesn't guarantee triumph, of course. But for sure, it's the only way there. And facing head-on whatever it is you encounter has an almost uncanny way of freeing you.

Many of you played a decisive role in ensuring that your almost-Alma Mater emerged from the crisis that bore down on us...anti-fragile and stronger than ever.

I thank you so very much for that...and hope your reward will be...always to remember that living your life with your truest, most generous self...is what will keep you **strong**.

Thank you very much.

