WORDS OF FAREWELL
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On a breathtaking day like today it is hard to come up with any one final concise thing to leave with you. Over the last several weeks, as almost every other college on planet Earth has had its graduation, I scoured the newspapers for inspiration from other speakers, while flying back and forth between Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. I have another day job, as a faculty physician, at the School of Medicine, where I direct the largest pediatric brain tumor program in the Western United States, and I’m an epidemiologic researcher interested in understanding why children develop cancer. So, I travel a good deal for academic meetings.

But now, today is the end of my term after seven years as the Bing Director of Human Biology. Well, what should I share with you? Then it came to me. Just like you, I graduated in Human Biology. I took 5 years—yes not 4, apparently I was not the fastest Human Biology student—and now over the past 16 years I have taught in Human Biology. With those 20 plus years, I realize that I should be receiving my 5th diploma. It’s like the movie Groundhog Day. Imagine being a Human Biology student forever! But, somehow our Student Services Managers Lia Caccia and Matt Kramer have never pinned me down to complete my Capstone experience to graduate. Parents and families, all our grads complete their Capstone experience via Honors, a Senior Synthesis, or most commonly a Practicum with a series of culminating workshops capped by a final written reflection essay. I panicked. I never completed my reflection essay. Maybe they’ll revoke my Stanford diploma? Yikes! Calm down…zen.

So I read the instructions for the Human Biology Capstone essay: “When you have completed all capstone workshops, you will submit a final reflective essay of at least 1,200 words, synthesizing your capstone experiences and your workshops.” Oh my gosh, no one here wants to hear more than 1,200 words! Keep reading, “The essay should explore connections among service, research, pre-professional, and classroom experiences at Stanford, and the essay should end with an overall synthesis of experiences, workshops, and personal and professional goals.”
Okay, so I started outlining some thoughts and events from my past.

Freshman year: I can’t remember anything, but it sure was fun.

There was that sophomore C in Chemistry 35.

During my time as a junior overseas in Tours, France, the Baltimore of France, there was my friend who swallowed a 10 Franc coin when playing a social game at Palais de la Bière.

And then, there was the 10-foot paper mâché…papier mâché in my now proper French, as I learned after 8 French classes. Okay the papier mâché volcano I built for a Roble Hall luau that ignited into flames when the mix of chemicals my friend majoring in chemical engineering said would be just the right mix for the eruption. Sure, the Palo Alto Fire Department had to swing by Roble Hall, but clearly my C in Chemistry 35 was well deserved.

During my firth remedial year, when I was a Teaching Assistant for the Core, our pet chinchilla Atilla, whom we kept in the TA office in building 80, jumped out the window. That did not end well. Nor did my driving my car one night through the Quad and past the Claw in White Plaza. Yes, apparently the police have been camped out there for decades. Don’t do that!

Okay, keep thinking, get more serious. Yes, the Core, lactose and lactase, my upper division classes, my Area of Concentration “Social Aspects of Child Development.” A course on Adolescence before Lisa Medoff was born. My being a TA for Craig Heller, who is apparently ageless and superhuman.

Oh boy, this is not working! Okay Fisher, don’t panic. Do what you do for any exam or assignment, read the question back. Service...experiences...goals. What did Human Biology do to carry me to where I am today? Now I’m getting somewhere.

Every five years at my Stanford class reunion I make a point to dive right in the first day and have lunch at a table of 10 strangers from my class. In college this would have freaked me out. But now, I can be more reflective and listen. Last time I sat with 10 engineers from Seattle, you know the folks at Lockheed Marietta and
Boeing who think hanging out in the Science and Engineering Quad, SEQ graduates, is cool. One of them asked me who I was. I replied that was a children’s oncologist in the medical school and also director of Human Biology. In a very direct manner, the engineer inquired what had been my Stanford major. Human Biology, I responded. He chewed on a sandwich for a couple minutes, brain gears obviously turning, and then lobbed back, “When you were a sophomore in the Human Biology Core, did you know that you wanted to direct Human Biology?” What? Who thinks in a linear fashion like that? I was just trying to get through the exams. I came precisely to this spot on the stage today by serendipity. Graduates, serendipity is not only okay, I encourage it. Everyone, applaud serendipity!

Ah hah, now I’m closing in on the answer for my capstone reflection. Two weeks ago while I was in Chicago at an oncology conference, listening to Stanford alum Atul Gawande. He was talking with such heartfelt passion about mortality and the end of life. He described a philosophy I have had to take regrettably for hundreds of children and young adults whom I could not save as they gradually lost their long battles with cancer. In these situations, the ultimate goal is not a good death but a good life. It’s something I ask families and children and myself every day: what is your goal? My own goal is not a specific job, money, or fame. For all of us, our goal should entail a good life. Human Biology and Stanford have given me so many diverse experiences and opportunities, I’ve never really worried about what would be my job or career. Neither should you. Let serendipity be your guide. Human Biology has prepared you to take on almost any direction…helping and advancing the human condition.

You see, there was one important experience I left off my earlier outline of points for this Capstone reflection: 1980 New Student Orientation, NSO that is. Donald Kennedy, the 3rd director of Human Biology and then Stanford’ 8th president greeted my freshman class at Mem Chu and seared in my brain the importance always to serve others. Serving others is paramount to me.

Lia and Matt, I have my final answer. Pencils, blue books, and scantrons down. How did all my experiences in Human Biology and Stanford synthesize into my future goal? My goal has always been to be happy and to have a good life, to serve and help others more than myself, be they patients or students or human knowledge,
Valuing always the community around me more than myself and leaving the world a little better each day. And don’t take yourself too seriously!

I’ve sat in my office with so many of you, yes you, our graduates in the first five rows, talking about your next steps, scholarships, jobs, graduate school, community service, and careers. Yes, those are exciting next steps, but not your goal. What is your goal? As did I, you too have had the answer all along, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, who had her magical ruby slippers all along. You have always had the answer to, “What is your goal?” You were drawn to Human Biology because you are some of the most elite scholars who have uniquely bridged biological and social sciences to advance the human condition. You embrace being happy and making the community around you happier. Sure, you are diverse in background, interests, and knowledge. But more than any other major, you students are together a collaborative and loving group who support and spend so much time helping advance each other.

Time for one final lesson from this Director of Human Biology. Class of 2019, please reach out with both your hands and hold those of the community member next to you. Celebrate your common goal, and keep your hands together for a moment please. I imagine your time here has all gone by in a flash. You sit here precisely where Stanford University celebrated its opening on October 1, 1891, and time keeps moving forward, and more students will follow. So, pause for one last moment, and take in all around you—your friends, your family, the Quad, today’s soft winds and sun, even the Stanford motto, die luft der freiheit weht, the wind of freedom blows. We’re resting here in one of my very favorite places in the world.

Look around you, graduates. Always remember the goal that Human Biology has instilled to both you and me as alumni. Pursue a good life and be happy, embrace serendipity and new opportunities, and maintain your zeal and curiosity toward change for the better in the communities of humanity everywhere. Sure, there will be bumps in the road, but as any Stanford grad should always remember, “It’s all right now, it’s all right now, it’s all right now.” I wish you all the happiness, health, and positivity for humanity going forward. Congratulations and godspeed. Thank you.