

2026 Commencement
Chancellor Michael F. Collins remarks

If I might, I would like to offer a final word, or two, with you!

You see, I had this terrific speech on AI, its importance and the impact it will have on the future of the health professions BUT given what's happened this spring on commencement stages across the land, I thought better of giving an AI speech! For sure, that would have resulted in some looks of disdain and disappointment.

So, having discarded that erudite writing, today I would like to speak with you about IA: Inspired Altruism. On this commencement day, each of you shall embark upon careers in which your altruism can bring inspiration to those for whom you will have the privilege to serve.

On the day of my commencement from medical school, I served as a class speaker and reflected upon the significance of the occasion.

I told my classmates a story about a young person who also would be graduating that year. In every way, as I told that story, I was thinking of my cousin, with whom I shared a birthday, he coming into our world two years after me! Richard, born with Down syndrome, had many gifts but he would not be giving a commencement speech at his graduation, nor would he be afforded the opportunities my classmates and I would have following the receipt of our diplomas.

Yet like physicians, Rich lived his life with purpose and, unquestionably, he gave more than he received. In every interaction with Rich, people sensed and experienced his unbridled love. His smile was ever-present; he took great pride in his work bagging groceries and would even go the extra mile to carry shoppers' bags to their cars; and he experienced a sense of accomplishment when his check came in at the end of the week.

In every way, he simply and profoundly lived a life of inspired altruism. No airs! Little ego! Full of kindness! And all he asked in return was that folks would respect his human dignity and be kind to him. He sensed when they weren't, but never was his altruism diminished.

I observed on that commencement day that each of my classmates, as we began our careers in the health professions, would soon recognize that our livelihood would often depend upon the illness and misfortune of others. We would need clarity of thought and action and demonstrate that our ethical approach to the

practice and business of medicine could never come into conflict. We would take an oath that this would be so; always!

So today, for me, and hopefully, you, it's not AI on which we should focus; it's IA.

Will each of you in your careers live inspired altruism?

As a nurse, will you commit to a practice in which you use all of the talents you possess and with the gifts you have been given and the education you have received, will you practice at the top of your license but always be willing to attend to and be present with your patient; and kindly hold their hand?

When I had the privilege to hold Tan Chingfen's hand, I hoped it brought comfort to her as I know it meant the world to me! I wish you that experience throughout your career!

As a scientist, will you follow in the footsteps of those who have nurtured your careers? The wonders of science are before you and you can harness their potential and change the course of the history of disease. While the buildings we have constructed on our campus will serve as superstructures to support science at our institution, it is the people, like you, who will study, innovate and create within them; who shall take full advantage of the inspired altruism and harness the AI that will accompany and accelerate discovery and its marvels.

As physicians, will you take a moment to comfort a child whose illness makes them afraid of what lies before them; will you pause and take the hand of a pre-op patient and encourage and console them in advance of their procedure, even when you're in a rush; will you, when all therapeutic options have been exhausted, embrace the patient and their family and hold their hands with esteem? With such moments of engagement, your inspired altruism will make a meaningful difference, engender trust and leave a lasting mark.

My cousin Rich had his challenges, but he always had time to shake your hand; say a kind word; and offer a smile. His was a life of inspired altruism!

Like Monica Bertagnolli, will you, with your clinical and scientific acumen, care first and foremost about the patient before you and all the while, be prepared to lead our nation's research enterprises as a beacon of wisdom, imbued with common sense and guided by integrity?

Like Robert Harrington, maybe not as a kid from Somerville, but as a proud member of your community, will you retain the innate humility of your roots, rise to the pinnacle of your profession, come to lead and serve, but always do so with compassion, kindness and a sure heart?

Like Gerald Chan, will you, with consistency and conviction, honor your mother and father, express gratitude for their goodness and kindness; and will your intellect, determination and generosity of spirit guide your every action and in so doing, make your world better?

AI will have an enormous impact on the future of nursing, science and medicine. But there is nothing artificial about IA and IA embraces the embodiment of actual human intelligence. Inspired altruism defines humanity and promotes and enhances the human condition.

May yours be a life of inspired altruism and may your example be of commitment, encouragement and support to those entrusted to your care.

Long into the future, we shall celebrate your many accomplishments and UMass Chan shall take great pride in calling you one of our own.

But as you leave here today, please recall the message I shared with you on your first day of school: always hold the hands of your patients with esteem.

And, if one day, it is my hand that seeks to be held, please know of the great privilege it was to lead this institution and with inspired altruism, please come and see me and hold my hand!

Congratulations and Godspeed!