

## **The Last Lecture**

**April 17, 2009**

Good afternoon! Welcome to IUPUI. A very special welcome—or should I say welcome back—to Golam Mannan, who was in Wishard yesterday getting a heart cath and three stents. I am thrilled the procedure went well. You are my reminder to take it easy in this lecture today, slow down, not move too quickly.

Thank you, Craig and Charles for your kind words of introduction. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Senior Academy under the leadership of Bill Voos, the IUPUI administration, and the IU Foundation for organizing this event and giving me the opportunity to share perspectives with you. Lastly, I would also like to acknowledge and express my appreciation to two individuals, Chancellor Bepko and my colleague and friend Charlie Kelley—your compassion, humility, and perseverance have inspired many of us in this room and on this campus.

Let's turn the clock back 19 years: July 1990. IU's partnership with Moi University in Kenya has just begun—there is no AMPATH, no IU House, no IU vehicle. Moi University School of Medicine, located in the sleepy town of Eldoret, anticipates the arrival of its inaugural class of medical students in October. The fledgling school, destined to become Kenya's second medical school, consists of just 4 Kenyan faculty members. Representing Indiana University, I have recently arrived in Eldoret along with my wife and three young sons, to join my Kenyan colleagues. My first task is to find a place to house my family and the contingent of IU faculty members, residents, and students who are slated to visit Moi later in the academic year.

My Kenyan counterpart, a delightful surgeon and educator named Peter Nyarang'o, has introduced me to one of the great Kenyan runners, Ibrahim Hussein. Hussein has invested his winnings in real estate and owns several rental properties in Eldoret. Mr. Hussein has taken me to see one of his houses. We walk in the driveway of the compound. To our left is a magnificent two story dwelling, far larger than my home in the States, and plenty big enough for my family and the many IU guests. But, on the right of the driveway, there is a mud and stick structure that looks like it belongs in the shanty town of Slumdog millionaire. Its roof consists of irregular, lopsided pieces of corrugated sheet metal; its windows just newspaper plastered across holes in the walls.

From the door of the house—not really a door, just a bigger hole in the wall—steps a young man. He seems tentative, uncomfortable, caught off guard. His mismatched shirt and pants are filthy, tattered.

Hussein leans over and whispers in my ear—don't worry, he is just a squatter. If you rent the home, I'll kick him out.

I scan the compound; a guava tree with chirping yellow weavers in the branches; orange and lemon trees in the backyard; in one side yard there is a young avocado tree groaning under its burden of green fruit; and in the other side yard, 12 inch goldfish swimming in a small, man-made pool.

I look back at the squatter—his name is Bob. For an instant, he catches my gaze, but then stares at his bare feet.

I quickly scan the house and yard one more time, and then turn to Mr. Hussein: It's a lovely house, just what IU needs, I'll take it.

And then I turn to Bob, "Bob, this place could really use a gardener—would you like a job as a gardener?"

When the Senior Academy first asked me to reflect on life's lessons and meaning in this lecture, I immediately thought of Ecclesiastes' wisdom, "there is nothing new under the sun". The important lessons of life have been well articulated by the masters of philosophy, literature, and the arts going back as far as the ancient Greeks. At best, anything I might say in this lecture would be cliché. But when I shared my thoughts with my son, Seth, he pushed back. "Dad, life's lessons are common," he acknowledged. "But your life—like every individual's—is unique. When you put the cliché in the context of a unique life experience, you elevate the cliché to the original, you give the cliché meaning—and when your experience is heartfelt and sincere, you nurture hope."

Hence the story of Bob the Gardener, and lessons # 1 and #2 on the proverbial kindergarten wall:

1. Share everything
2. Play fair

Nearly two decades later, Bob is still working for IU. When I sent a note to Sarah Ellen Mamlin who is in Kenya currently and asked her to email me this photo of bob, she sent it to me along with a short message stating that bob's still trying, but he has never really picked up the knack for gardening. And in my reply to Sarah Ellen I said, that is all the more reason we love him.

So, reflecting on other personal experiences, I will try to illustrate a few of the important lessons I have learned: meaning is found in discovering who we are, acknowledging and managing our gifts and our imperfections, listening—truly listening, taking risks, and in giving and receiving simple human kindnesses.

Inscribed in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi is this ancient saying, "Know Thyself"—Leaving aside for the time being the transcendent or theological implications of that aphorism, making a difference in our world starts with knowing—and accepting—ourselves in terms of our own personalities, our behaviors and habits, our gifts and talents, and our weaknesses. I grew up in a big family—4 brothers and 8 sisters. I was the third oldest. One summer evening, I had accompanied my parents and one of my sisters to a Starlight Musical production of a Broadway show. Some of you might remember that theatre—the roof covered only the stage. From your seat, you could choose to watch the stars on stage or above your head. Upon returning home from that show, my sister was standing alone on the front doorstep, sobbing uncontrollably about one of my younger brothers: "the police...they came and took him away." Four decades later, my entire family—and my brother—chuckle about that day. But, at the time, it was a crisis. It seems my brother and one of his friends had decided that the solution to a boring Indianapolis summer evening was to chop down a couple of our neighbors' trees and slash their cars tires. Of course, my brother got caught.

I am sure my brother had some imperfections—some even of his own doing—but this episode caused me to have a lot of guilt. After all, as one often sees in adolescent sibling rivalries, my goal in life then was to stay one step ahead of my brother—get better grades, run faster, be stronger...basically, to beat the kid up—and keep him down—whenever mom and dad weren't looking. But on that starry night, I realized what an awful, selfish brother I had been. It was as if someone had held up a mirror to my soul, and for the first time, I saw what a curmudgeon I really was.

Today, I have much better understanding about that episode. But, on that day, I resolved that I would do better toward my brother. And, as a father of six kids—three boys, and three girls—I’ve tried to encourage them not to repeat my mistake. Every night, when I used to tuck them into bed, I would ask them, “*what is your #1 job*”; and they would reply, “*to take good care of my brothers and sisters*”.

My other imperfections? Not sure we want to go there! —my prom date would have told you I have lousy taste in clothes! As a young man, I learned very quickly that I would not be winning beauty contests...unless, of course, my mother was judging. Most of us readily discover that we are imperfect; reconciling it—accepting it—is the challenge. Nevertheless, it is our imperfections, our blemishes, our Achilles heel that define us as who we are, at least in part.

I am sometimes asked, what is the most difficult challenge you face in Kenya? My answer is invariably the same: Americans getting along with Americans! Here we might do well to recall lessons 3-6 on the kindergarten wall—clean up your mess; don’t take things that aren’t yours; say sorry when you hurt somebody! As many of you know, in any given month, up to 60 different individuals will be housed in that fish-bowl we call “IU House”. That’s a lot of people, and a lot of potential for relationships to go awry.

To illustrate my point, I was tempted to give a true example of Americans not getting along with Americans. In a flash, nearly 10 examples came to mind; but then I began to think, but what if that person hears what I say, or even worse, what if they are in the audience and listen to me describe them as jealous, spiteful, egotistical, or just plain lazy! No, that won’t work.

So instead, let me turn Shakespeare. The life lesson, eloquently expressed in Hamlet by Shakespeare’s Polonius to his son Laertes is well known to most of you:

...The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail...  
 Those friends thou hast and their adoption tried,  
 Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel...  
 Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;  
 Take each man’s censure but reserve thy judgment...  
 This above all: to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day, ...  
Thou canst not be false to any man.

Let's shift gears. The next "lesson" is perhaps less a lesson than a personal discovery, namely, "flying kites is a metaphor for life"... As a child, I used to love flying kites. "Mary Poppins" was the first movie I ever saw in a movie theatre—its upbeat tune "let's go fly a kite", is one that I enjoy whistling to this day. It can make a four year old and her 53 year old Dad feel invincible.

...when you send it flying up there, all at once your lighter than air, you can dance on the breeze over houses and trees, with your fist holding tight, to the end of your kite.....

...dancing on breezes over houses and trees, by golly, you begin to believe that you I really can make the impossible possible! But, first you've got to understand how to work the spool of string. And on a blustery day a couple of weeks ago, that is where things began to get tricky for Abigail and me. The wind was cantankerous, unpredictable, uncooperative. During those few times when it was gentle and supportive, buffeting her kite, Abigail's passion soared; when the wind drove the kite to the earth, her spirits sank. She had neither the skill nor the experience to let the string out. Limited to a short string, her kite was not able to endure the vicissitudes of the wind. But, with a little encouragement from me, she tried again—this time, though, I put my hand over her hand on the spool, and showed her how to let it out. Little by little, the kite caught the breeze, and before long it was a couple of hundred feet in the air. Even when a gust of wind drove the kite precipitously toward the earth, Abigail and her kite seemed to sense what they needed to do, the kite righted itself and climbed steadily toward the heavens.

Needing a helper, a friend or a mentor as we journey through life seems self evident. It is astonishing to me how often we forget that truth! Just to give this 30 minute lecture, I received help from several persons. When I look back over the last 30 years, the number of helpers, friends, and mentors are far too many to name. One never accomplishes anything by oneself. No matter what you do, what goal you strive for, or what accolade you receive, the plain truth is that "your" achievement" like "my" achievement is a reflection of the cumulative effort and input of tens, hundreds, even thousands of persons. It is arrogant to claim otherwise. Sometimes it is best to purge the word "I" from your vocabulary. When you have the choice, choose "we".

But “we” means that “we” need to be adept at developing personal or professional relationships with other individuals—and that’s tricky business. It is not necessarily intuitive, and above all, it requires trust.

Shortly after we moved into the IU house, Lea Anne and I had an evening dinner party for a number of guests. By that time, we had already hired a cook for IU House, a quiet, pleasant woman named Penina. But, since we did not have many guests yet staying at IU House, Penina only cooked lunch. I would drive her home in the daylight hours of the afternoon. But, for that particular evening get-together, she had agreed to stay late to help with the cooking and dishes. It was dark when it came time drive her home. There were no street lights in Eldoret then, and it was beginning to rain. I was tired, and to be honest, a bit cranky. At that time, the IU vehicle was a leased sub-compact, rear-wheel drive Nissan. As Penina and I were getting into the car, Bob the gardener tapped on the window and said he would like to come with us. His request irritated me. “Why does he want to “bum” a ride to Langas at this hour?” I thought to myself. At that time, I still hardly knew him—I had seen him out in the yard cutting grass with a Panga—a machete—with a razor sharp blade “this” long; and, his two quarreling wives annoyed me. But, other than that, I really did not know anything about him. With a curt, “OK”, I told him to get in the back seat, and we took off. Langas was a few miles away...we arrived at the spot where I customarily dropped Penina—her house about a football field away from the road. I waited for to get out; but, she simply sat there, making no motion whatsoever to leave the vehicle. She looked at me: “I’m not getting out here! At this time of night, its not safe—you will have to drive me to my door.” I looked at her, and then I looked out across the now muddy, slick field.” Thought to myself, “Gee whiz, I’m not sure this car can make it across that field”—I gunned the engine, slipped and slid and fish-tailed my way across mud and grass, dropped Penina at her doorstep, turned the car around, slipped and slid across the field back to the tarmac, and returned home to the IU House. The whole time, Bob sat quietly in the back seat, never saying a word. Upon arriving back at the IU House, he stepped out of the car, thanked me for the ride, and went into his “house”.

At which point, it was very clear to me that I was a fool. Not only had I misjudged the danger of travelling outside at night in that part of town, I had wrongly judged Bob to the point of mistrusting him. Fortunately, Bob was not as judgmental. He understood that I was making assumptions that were just plain incorrect, but rather than confronting me about them, he went along for the ride to protect me.

I learned—or relearned—several lessons that evening: I need to be more ready to question my own assumptions before acting; trust is the cornerstone of lasting relationships; and trust in relationships—personal or professional—take time to develop and mature.

Fran Quigley's book about AMPATH and the IU Kenya partnership should be in print within the next month—the title emphasizes the importance of relationships. *Walking Together, Walking Far* borrows from an African proverb which says, if you want to walk fast, walk alone; if you want to walk far, walk with a friend. I can assure you, without the hundreds and thousands of Americans and Kenyans who have walked with us, the current leaders of the IU-Kenya partnership, especially me, would not amount to a hill of beans.

Welcome to my office. Photos of my wife and kids sit on my desk. Just above them, pinned to a bulletin board, is a quote from Carl Rogers. It says: "We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know."

I would like to tell you the story of one of my patients at Westside health center: Let's call him "Larry". I remember one particular day: Dressed in a baggy, tattered shirt and oversized pants, Larry looked at me with vacant eyes. Around his shoulders, he had slung a grimy Indianapolis Star bag. It was the same bag I had seen him carry for many years. Perhaps he had been a paperboy once. He never bathed, and the odor that seeped from his clothing reminded me of a wrestling room. In his forties now, he had the mental capacity of a first grader. "I don't feel good," he said.

I had been hurrying to finish seeing my last few patients so I could go home, relax, and enjoy a peaceful evening after an especially hectic day. I had examined Larry many times in the past, but something in Larry's eyes this day called me to slow down and listen. In a monotone, gravelly voice, his fears spilled out. He told me about his mother, her death from cancer a year previously, his life without her, and his terrible loneliness. I didn't say a thing, but after he finished telling his story, Larry smiled and his eyes brightened. He stood to leave, extended his hand, and graciously said, "Thanks, Doc."

The sacred trust that physicians hold with their patients can be a window into the soul. It allows us to share in great joy, but also to witness great suffering, including some of the

darkest, most crippling acts that one human being can commit against another human being. Most of us, myself included, do not fully understand the magnitude of these personal tragedies—the suffering, the shame. But I am convinced that by listening, truly listening to those who suffer, each of us—whether physician or not—can help them find their way back to wholeness. It is not an easy task. “We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know.”

Let’s return to flying kites—youthful passion and idealism. As an adolescent and a young man, I believed every individual had the potential to change our world, and now as a middle aged, nearly over the hill faculty member at a staid Midwestern medical school...I still believe it! Never underestimate your potential to make your home, your community, your world a better place. I chose a career in medicine because I thought that field best suited me as a means to accomplishing that end—I have never regretted my choice.

When I meet with my new group of medical students on the wards of Wishard Hospital every few months, it is customary to share expectations. I listen to their expectations, and they listen to mine. I try to remind my students that every patient they see is somebody’s son or daughter, and likely someone’s mother, father, grandmother or grandfather. I tell my students, “regardless of the color of the patient’s skin, the size of their pocketbooks, the language they speak, the type of clothes they wear, or how they smell, I expect you to treat them as you would a mother or father, whether you are in the their presence, or simply discussing their health problems in the classroom or a call room.”

I believe there is a moral imperative to help our neighbors. A corollary of that statement is the right to essential health care for all persons. Examine any faith—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism—or the tenets of secular humanism. The moral imperative to assist a neighbor in need is absolute. The fundamental question that each of us has to ask ourselves is this: am I going to act on that moral imperative, or am going I to close my eyes to it? It is a choice we must make.

I think you would agree that risk is inherent in every choice, and that risk has the potential to cause a lot angst in each and every one of us.

In the mid-1980's, before some of us could ever pick out Kenya on a map of Africa, I took a leave of absence from IU to work as a volunteer physician for a year in a remote area of Haiti. It was, at the time, my first extended visit to a so-called developing country, and the culmination of a desire and a conviction that I had had since high school.

At the time, I believed—and still believe—that each of us has the duty to defend and restore human dignity. As a physician, I believed I would understand better how to do that by having worked with people who live with the horror of no choice, or at best, severely constrained choice.

At the time, Lea Anne and I had just two kids, Rob and Zach, both in diapers. Our site in Haiti had no electricity, no running water, no phone. Zach, the youngest, was just 8 months old, and had been born premature, having spent the first week of his life on a ventilator. He was a floppy kid, and quite skinny.

Though I was excited about working in Haiti and immersing myself in the culture there, the risk was anxiety provoking. I traveled to Haiti a week ahead of my family. The first night, I slept in a hotel room in Port au Prince, along with a sociologist from Minnesota who was familiar with Haiti and was going to introduce me the next day to the site where I had been posted. His name was Tom O'Toole.

It was a small hotel room with two single beds, one alongside the other. At some point in the middle of the night, I began to sleepwalk. I stood up on the mattress at the foot of my bed, and like a lion leaping at the hind quarters of a zebra, I jumped onto Tom's bed. His bedpost shattered, the mattress boards fell out of the frame, and Tom and I crashed to the floor.

For sure, the year in Haiti turned out to be very challenging, though highly enlightening. At times, it was physically and emotionally draining; testing our marriage, and threatening to our young family. At other times, the experience was uplifting and affirming. Professionally, the experience provided me knowledge, skills, and especially insight—insight into public and community health, gender inequality, nutrition and starvation, income and food security, personal and institutional relationships, and health systems. All of this laid the groundwork for the work that would happen in Kenya over the subsequent two decades.

The lesson—and this one is not written on the kindergarten wall: There comes a time when you simply have to make a leap of a faith. Taking risks gives texture and meaning to our lives. Six feet under in a cemetery is the only risk-free environment that I am aware of. For sure, taking risks causes anxiety, and none of us are immune from it. But, through dedicated preparation, and with the support of trusting relationships, we can move forward with confidence. Trust is the currency of confidence, and confidence is the currency of risk taking.

In going to Haiti, I was quite literally at a new boundary line, looking at a new frontier. To guide me, I had the hard-earned knowledge and skills that come from years of dedicated preparation; and I was grounded in my own culture and traditions. But each new experience, each unpredictable event there challenged my knowledge and skills, my cultural beliefs, my traditions—and that was good. After all, at times, perceptions can be deceiving.

A few years later, on safari in Masai Mara with my brother and his wife, my sister in law was taking pictures of the landscape with her video camera. My brother and I suddenly saw an elephant a few hundred feet away. We were excited—it was the first day of our safari, and we had not yet seen elephant. “Look”, we exclaimed, “there’s an elephant.” And my sister-in-law, all the time looking through the video camera as she scanned the landscape, kept saying, “Where, where is the elephant”. When we returned home and watched the video clip she had been taking, sure enough, the elephant loomed as big as—well—as big as an elephant on the screen, yet on the audio, we could hear her voice as clear as mine saying, “Where’s an elephant...no, that’s not an elephant, I think it’s a tree.” True story!

But we don’t really have to go to another country to face a new frontier, do we? After all, isn’t life just a series of choices, a series of decisions, each with their own consequences, which in turn simply raise new challenges that demand new choices? We can retreat from each new boundary, and cling blindly to our beliefs. Or, like impulsive wildebeests crossing the Mara River, we can plunge ahead without preparation and without thinking. Or, we can consider who we are, allow ourselves to question our assumptions, and then after due consideration, make just the right choice...until, of course, we reach the next new frontier.

But, before I try to wax too philosophical, let's go back to even before Haiti. Some of you are probably thinking that the person who was really making the leap was not me, but my poor wife, whom I was dragging to hell, and not necessarily to hell and back. And my response to you is: your probably right. Which brings me to arguably the most important lesson from my Indy-Haiti-Kenya-Indy experience: when you settle down for the long haul, choosing a partner is the most important decision you will ever make—make sure you choose the right one!

How we respond to any challenge, any problem depends to a certain extent on our values. To one degree or another, each of us has accepted and lives by a particular value system—but why? What values did you choose and why did you choose them? Are they the “right” values? Of course, answering these questions requires that we dig even deeper. At some level, these questions become questions of faith?

I think it is important for each of us—and our institutions—to re-examine periodically our core values. The process can be revealing, affirming and refreshing.

I would like to focus a few of the minutes of this lecture on Joe Mamlin, and one of the many lessons that he embodies. None of us would be here today hearing about the IU-Kenya partnership if not for Joe's leadership. If Joe had been willing to take a few days off from his work in Kenya today, he would be giving this lecture, and I would be in the audience enjoying every minute of it.

Joe and I are both early risers. When I go to Kenya, which I do three or four times each year, Joe and I tend to meet early in the morning, before the sun is up, and before almost any other person at IU House has awakened. When Joe and I speak publically about AMPATH and the IU-Kenya program, we tend to give a sanitized version of the work there. But, behind closed doors, we grapple with the ugly underbelly, wrestling with challenges that might frighten away our most ardent supporters.

During one of my visits a few months ago, we were having one of “those” days—on the wards, in the classrooms, in the halls of government, in the communities, and among the Americans in IU House the forces of greed and self-interest were rattling their sabers. The environment was increasingly hostile and discouraging, to the point that one was forced to ask, why am I here, what am I really accomplishing?

Early the next morning, as he does every morning, Joe had gotten up to prepare dog food and feed the three wayward dogs that now make their home at IU House. Unless you're a pathologic dog lover, you would probably agree with me that these dogs are not particularly desirable. They're mutts, they scare virtually every Kenyan who comes to visit, they bark all night and keep weary, jet-lagged visitors from sleeping, and they always seem to be licking themselves. OK—truth be told, I do not like dogs even in the US, and Joe knows it. So, when I said to him, “Joe, you have so much on your own plate, and so many other things you could be doing, why do you make the effort to feed these scoundrel dogs?”

Joe looked at me, and without missing a beat, replied “sometimes it is the only thing that makes sense.”

Perhaps you need to know Mamlin a while, but his response was not really about feeding dogs; rather, the “it” he was referring to is “unconditional love.” To repeat, “Sometimes, unconditional love is the only thing that makes sense.”

All of us need heroes. For most of us, the heroes in our lives are those persons who quietly walk the high road, do their job without fanfare, demonstrate integrity in their convictions, and express small kindnesses with humility. They don't look for credit, indeed, they are rarely recognized with it; but they are the people who give us hope. They rock babies at Riley, fold linens in nursing homes, teach our kids to dance, work in factories, or do any number of other routine jobs with the resolve that they are making a better life for their children and our country. We should never underestimate the power of these quiet examples.

As we celebrate IUPUI's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I would like to tell you briefly about one of my other heroes, one of our own. She is the middle-aged woman pictured on this slide. Her name is Ellen. Thirty-two years ago, if you had been an undergraduate student here at IUPUI sitting in Cavanaugh Hall, she would have been one of your classmates. As a young woman, she was an exceptional violinist, an avid runner and volleyball player, and a gifted writer—she is still a gifted writer. She graduated from college at 19 with a humanities degree, joined the Peace Corps, and spent two years in the desert of Niger, a truly god forsaken part of our world. She returned to America, having decided to become a medical doctor. She enrolled here at IUPUI, completed a second degree, this time in chemistry, and then enrolled in McGill University School of Medicine. Since

completing medical school in Canada, she has lived her entire professional life in the remotest parts of Nigeria and far northern Cameroon, serving the people there wholly as a volunteer.

She likes to describe me as “the one she carried on her back”, a phrase commonly used by girls in some parts of west Africa to describe a sibling that comes after them in birth order.

Ellen chose not to get married or have children. I had the privilege of visiting her in Cameroon several years ago where she runs a government district hospital and community outreach program. At the time, she was the only medical doctor in the district, serving tens of thousands of people. Sitting in the wards of her hospital, surrounded by some of the most destitute, impoverished, and wretched persons on this earth, I asked her if she ever regretted not having a family.

She smiled gently and replied, “I could not be happier.” Then, gesturing to the staff and all the patients that fill every bed in the ward, she said, “This is my family, these are my brothers and sisters.”

As for me, I will return home this evening, wrap my arms around each of my girls, and then tuck my littlest one—my soon-to-be kindergartener—into bed. And, as I do that, I will say to her, “Abbie, what is your #1 job” ...and she will reply, as she always does, “To take care of my brothers and sisters.