From Terror to Enlightenment in Dental Education: UCLA School of Dentistry Class of 2008 Commencement Address

Paul Goldhaber, M.A., D.D.S.

Dr. Goldhaber, Dean Emeritus, Harvard School of Dental Medicine, delivered this address on June 1, 2008, at the UCLA School of Dentistry—shortly before his death in Boston on July 14, 2008, at the age of 84. The address is published here with the permission of the UCLA School of Dentistry.

Dean Park, members of the graduating class, honored guests, faculty, parents, spouses, and friends:

It was exactly sixty years ago that I was sitting in an auditorium, just as you are today. I, too, was graduating from dental school. No, it was not UCLA School of Dentistry. Your dental school did not yet exist. No, it was not Harvard School of Dental Medicine; my college grades were not good enough for that place.

There we sat at the graduation ceremony—all 150 of us, happy to have survived the reign of terror experienced during the previous four years at our dental school. But our class should not have been surprised. We had been forewarned by an alumnus. I still remember his words: “I didn’t graduate from NYU Dental—I escaped!” What a terrible thing to say to us and for me to repeat to you! But as we went through our four years, we learned that the denunciation was fully justified. Although most of our class members had served in World War II immediately before starting dental school, the NYU dental faculty managed to reduce these men to quivering masses of protoplasm! What kind of an educational institution were we in? It turns out that, during that era, teaching by terror was not limited to NYU, but seemed to be widespread at most dental schools.

Several years later, through a series of favorable events, I had the good fortune to become a young faculty member at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine. During that early period of my academic career, I was a member of the Department of Oral Pathology. The head of that department was a young, charismatic, exciting, and energetic Norwegian by the name of Reidar Sognnaes. He was an outstanding teacher and scientist. Reidar Sognnaes had one quality for which many of his young protégés were most grateful: he constantly managed to find opportunities for them to develop and grow academically. He enhanced their careers by finding special occasions for them to present their achievements and ideas at major scientific meetings. Importantly, he sought and found fellowship support from federal and private sources to give them some financial security until they could become independent investigators.

Perhaps Reidar Sognnaes’s most important contribution to dental education was the unique postdoctoral program he developed at Harvard. The forerunner of subsequent degree programs at Harvard and elsewhere, it combined clinical specialty training and research. From such programs, a new breed of clinical teacher arose, ushering in an explosion of new knowledge. Both teaching and clinical practice benefited enormously from these bright and challenging young academics. Clearly, their appearance on the scene was one of the key factors that helped initiate a drastic transformation of dental education. I have dubbed this new epoch the “Era of Enlightenment”—both in teaching and in clinical practice.

It is now almost fifty years since Reidar Sognnaes left Harvard to become the founding dean of the UCLA School of Dentistry. He created your school from scratch, doing an excellent job of building the

With the publication of this address, the Editor of the Journal of Dental Education would like to pay homage to Dr. Paul Goldhaber, a towering giant in the dental profession, who was renowned as both a researcher and an educator.
physical facilities, recruiting a fine faculty, and attracting outstanding dental students.

One of the many reasons I am delighted to be at UCLA addressing you today is to have the opportunity to pay homage to Reidar Sognnaes and to give you a bit of history that is too easily forgotten or lost over time. You will recall my earlier statement that, in 1948, the 150 dental students at NYU in my graduating class were men, in fact, all white men; there were no women and no minorities. This situation was not peculiar to NYU. It was universal throughout dental schools in the United States, except for the two historically black dental schools at Howard University and Meharry Medical College.

This state of affairs changed dramatically following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. It took this tragedy to awaken the country from its stupor regarding restricted access to higher and professional education. Suddenly, the following year, educational institutions, including medical and dental schools, began a concerted effort to recruit and admit women and minority students. Year by year, their combined numbers have increased. Today, in your graduating Class of 2008, women and minorities make up 45 percent of the class.

Exactly forty years ago, I was appointed dean of the Harvard School of Dental Medicine. I was the first Jew in Harvard University’s 332 years of existence to become dean of one of its schools. It is noteworthy that, last year, Harvard University again broke with tradition: 371 years after its founding, Harvard appointed the first woman to be its president. To give you some perspective as to the time frame these years cover, please note that Harvard was founded sixteen years after the Pilgrims first stepped onto Plymouth Rock in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Clearly, no one can accuse Harvard of acting hastily regarding such administrative appointments!

As dean of Harvard’s dental school, I now had the opportunity to “put my money where my mouth was.” I had the opportunity to wipe away the dental education shortcomings I had experienced at NYU. During my twenty-two years as dean, I got to know, encourage, and advise individual dental students and young faculty members. We discussed their careers, their hopes and dreams, or any matters that might have been troubling them. Our dental students were given opportunities at annual faculty-student retreats to critique the school—its policies, its curriculum, and its faculty. And they did it well. With surgical precision they brought to light our deficiencies from their perspective as students. And we listened and took corrective action!

Another reason I am pleased to be here is because of the extraordinary affinity between the UCLA School of Dentistry and Harvard’s School of Dental Medicine throughout your school’s existence. Many UCLA dental graduates have chosen to enter postdoctoral programs at Harvard, and many young faculty members at Harvard have chosen to come to UCLA where they have grown, flourished, and contributed to your education. The cross-fertilization brought about by these talented individuals has been extremely beneficial to both UCLA and Harvard, indeed to dental education and practice everywhere.

According to data I recently obtained, there are currently eight professors at the UCLA School of Dentistry who have been recruited from or graduated from the Harvard School of Dental Medicine. I knew five of them personally when they were at Harvard. This includes Dean No-Hee Park—of whom I’ll speak more a little later. What is extraordinary about this entire group is that their fields of expertise cover most of the basic and clinical subjects fundamental to the science and practice of clinical dentistry.

No-Hee Park was, without doubt, the most accomplished and impressive young dental student to enter Harvard’s School of Dental Medicine. When he came to us, he already had his dental degree from Korea and his Ph.D. in pharmacology from the Medical College of Georgia. At this stage of his career he was also a budding young scientist in the field of virology and molecular biology at Harvard Medical School and the Eye Research Institute in Boston. Following graduation from our dental school, he joined our faculty but was quickly recruited by the UCLA School of Dentistry. His meteoric rise through the academic ranks was due to his extraordinary research and administrative abilities. Fourteen years after starting at UCLA, No-Hee Park was appointed dean of your dental school, making him the first Asian to hold this position. The barriers continue to crumble!

For many years, a rallying cry amongst deans of dental schools has been “Fight for Funds, Faculty, and Facilities.” During the past decade that is exactly what Dean No-Hee Park has done for UCLA. Under his deanship, the “Era of Enlightenment” has been significantly advanced in dental education and practice.

It is traditional for commencement speakers to predict the future and offer some words of wisdom to the graduating class. I would like to prophesy that
the next twenty-five years will be free of worldwide strife—but I can’t.

I would like to prophesy that the next twenty-five years will bring worldwide prosperity—but I can’t.

I would like to predict that government regulation of health care programs will have little impact on your clinical practice—but I can’t.

What I can predict is that basic and clinical research will alter the nature of clinical practice. Your only recourse will be to become a perpetual student.

I can also give you one piece of advice that is critical for those of you who plan to engage in clinical practice: listen to your patients and care for your patients. That is the key to a career filled with service to your community and pleasure and satisfaction for yourself.

Let me end by recounting an incident that occurred to me when I was a youngster—around twelve years old. At that time, a group of us neighborhood kids enjoyed playing football. In order to avoid injuring ourselves by playing on a nearby empty lot covered with boulders and broken glass, we moved our football games to the only hazard-free area we could find. It happened to be in a cemetery located only a few streets away. The cemetery contained a large expanse of land with well-manicured grass that was being kept in reserve by the cemetery for future occupants.

One day, while at the cemetery, I became curious about the inscriptions on the old gravestones. One of them caught my eye. It read something like this:

“As You Are Now,
So Once Was I;
As I Am Now,
So Will You Be.”

As a youngster, those spooky words from the grave frightened me, and I scampered away in a hurry. Over the years, however, I have periodically thought of that epitaph. What was the author of those words trying to say? Was there a deeper meaning than the obvious? I’m sure there are many possible explanations.

My own interpretation is that each of us has a limited amount of time on this earth, so don’t waste it. It reminds us that, in addition to the good works one performs over a lifetime, one should leave time for play, for recreation, and for pleasure. That gravestone inscription reminds us that life is finite. Amongst Jews, life is so precious that every toast we perform includes the Hebrew phrase “L’Chaim!”—which means “To life!”

So here’s to the Class of 2008. In your honor, I raise my imaginary cup and toast you with good wishes and the age-old words “L’Chaim!”

Good luck, and God bless you all!