

Dr. Benjamin Carson
Keynote Address
Emory University's 167th Commencement
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Thank you very much. It is indeed an honor to be here at Emory University, and congratulations to the graduates and their families on this great milestone. I have a lot of connections with Emory and know a lot of people who have come from Emory to Hopkins and vice versa.

Dr. Mike Johns was the one who got me started doing complex craniofacial surgery. The late Dr. Fray Marshall, when he was an assistant professor and I was an intern, guided me through some of my very first operations. We have wonderful students who have come from Baltimore, like Allison Daniels, who is graduating here today, and just a host of amazing people that we know who are here at Emory.

Let me just – at the outset – say that I know there was some controversy about my views on creation and somebody thought that I said that evolutionists are not ethical people. Of course I would never say such a thing and would never believe such a thing, nor would anybody with any common sense. So, you know, that's pretty ridiculous.

At any rate, enough said about that.

I, as a youngster, was incredibly interested in medicine. It was really the only thing that kind of grabbed my fancy, and if there was anything on television or the radio about medicine, I was right there like a magnet. I even liked going to the doctor's office, so that gives you some idea of what I was like.

Going to the hospital was my favorite thing in the world! Most people that go to the hospital and have to wait for a few hours, they get all huffy and say, "My time is important too." But not me. I would sit out there in the hallway, and we would have to wait for one of the interns or residents to see us, because we were on medical assistance, but I didn't care because I was listening to the PA system.

“Dr. Jones, Dr. Jones, to the emergency room.” “Dr. Johnson, to the clinic.” They sounded so important, and I would be sitting there, thinking, “One day, they’ll be saying Dr. Carson, Dr. Carson.” But of course nowadays, we have beepers, so I still don’t get to hear it.

But it was the dream. And sometimes, that dream is really the only thing that pushes you through the very, very difficult times. But sometimes dreams can be... bad. And some of you may remember, some summers ago, the case of the Bijani twins, the 29-year-old Iranian women who were conjoined at the head. Their longtime dream was to be separated.

They scoured the world, looking for a team that might be willing to take on that enormous risk. When I was first contacted by them, I told them about Chang and Eng Bunker, the original Siamese twins who lived to be 63 years old and never got separated. They didn’t want to hear that.

So they finally ended up with a team in Singapore that had had some success separating craniopagus twins before, a team I was familiar with and had worked with before. And somehow, they managed to convince me to join them, against my better judgment. But I must say, when I met those young ladies, I was duly impressed. They were vivacious. They had learned to speak English in only seven months. Incredibly intelligent. They both had college degrees.

They both had law degrees. Only one wanted one, but they both had law degrees. So, they had a very thorough understanding of the risk that they were facing.

You know, they said something to me that really struck me. They said, “Doctor, we would rather die than spend another day stuck together.” And that seemed kind of harsh. But then I did something that I highly recommend to everyone before you criticize someone. I put myself in their shoes, and I said, “What would it be like to be stuck to somebody 24/7?” It could be the person in the world you like the most. How long would you like them for? And I began to understand what it was that they were going through.

And you know that operation did go on. We were in the third day of the operation, we were 90% finished, some people were starting to celebrate. I

was not among them, because as we got to the very end of the operation, they began to bleed profusely under great pressure. It was impossible to stop the hemorrhaging, and they died.

You know, not everything that we do, obviously, is successful. That really is the history of surgery. The first kidney transplants – disastrous. Heart transplants, lung transplants, liver transplants – disastrous. You'd say, "Why even bother?"

But things were learned, and that accumulated knowledge made it possible to be able to do those things that are so vitally important. Thomas Edison said he knew 999 ways a lightbulb did not work. Most of you have heard of the cleaning Formula 409. Why do they call it that? The first 408 didn't work.

You know, you think about Walter Dandy, the incredible neurosurgeon at Johns Hopkins many decades ago. The first one to do all kinds of things. First one to operate on a posterior fossa. People said, "You can't operate back there, the compartment's too small. The brain will swell and they will die!"

But he operated on somebody with a lesion of the **posterior fossa**. They died. Another, and they died. Another, and they died. The first 13, they all died. Can you imagine how discouraged he must have been? I can't even imagine what he said to the 14th patient. When they said, "How did the other 13 do?" He probably said, "Nobody's complaining."

But the fact of the matter is, he kept it up, and now we're able to do posterior fossa operations quite safely and quite routinely. And it's a matter of being able to learn from things that don't work, because we all get involved in them.

We should not become discouraged but take something away from it, and it will not be a true failure. We can also learn from other people's mistakes. And this is so vitally important because you are going out there to become the next generation of leaders in our nation. There's a great deal that we can learn from other societies that have divided themselves.

A wise man once said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." We find ourselves in a situation where we have such divisiveness. Democrats have

some good ideas; Democrats have some bad ideas. Republicans have some good ideas; Republicans have some bad ideas. That's why I'm an Independent.

But the fact of the matter is, we have got to understand something. The symbol of our nation – the bald eagle. And when you see an eagle flying, what do you notice about it? It has two wings. A left wing and a right wing. If it's both left wings, it crashes. If it's both right wings, it crashes. But when they work together, it is able to fly high and straight. And there is something we need to learn about that, which will be incredibly important to us.

I think the other thing that threatens the prosperity and the vitality of our nation is political correctness. Many people came to this nation, and they were trying to escape from societies that try to tell them what they could say and what they could think. And here we come, re-introducing it through the back door.

And we need to remember that it is not important that we all think the same thing. And the emphasis should not be on us saying the same thing; the emphasis should be on us learning to be respectful of individuals who have a different opinion. That's one of the things that made America great: the ability to engage in dialogue.

And I've always said, "If two people think the same thing about everything, one of them isn't necessary." We need to be able to understand that if we're going to make real progress.

There was a time in the history of the world when there was great intolerance for anybody who thought differently than the mainstream. It was called the Dark Ages. There are some things that can be learned, even in places and in societies where we think we know everything. Because if you look over the course of time, you will find a migration of what is thought to be the truth. And if we all engage in appropriate intellectual discussion, I think we will get there much faster.

I think the other thing that is so important for our success is persistence. Understanding who we are. What our values are. You know, I remember when I started high school, I was a straight-A student. Hadn't always been a straight-

A student; when I was in grade school, I was a terrible student. In fact, my nickname was 'Dummy'. That's what everybody called me.

Fortunately, I had a mother who believed in me when nobody else did. She was always saying, "Benjamin, you're much too bright to be bringing home grades like this." I brought them home anyway, but she was always saying that. And she was always being very, very encouraging.

She came home one day and turned off the T.V. She said, "You guys can only watch two or three T.V. programs during the week, and with all your spare time, you have to read two books apiece from the Detroit Public Library and submit to me written book reports." Which she couldn't read, but we didn't know that. She'd put little checkmarks and highlights and underlines. I really despised it; I didn't want to do it.

Everybody else was outside playing and having a good time, and there I was in the house reading books. An interesting thing happened, though. I actually began to enjoy reading those books. We were desperately poor, but between the covers of those books, I could go any place, I could be anybody, I could do anything. I began to know things that nobody else knew.

Within the space of a year and a half, I went from the bottom of the class to the top of the class, much to the consternation of all those people who used to laugh and call me 'Dummy'. Those who called me 'Dummy' in the fifth grade were coming to me in the seventh grade, "Benny, Benny, how do you work this problem?" And I'd say, "Sit at my feet, youngster, while I instruct you." I was perhaps a little obnoxious, but it sure felt good to say that to those turkeys.

But you know, that's one of the reasons my wife and I have devoted so much time to encouraging young people: because we recognize that there is an enormous amount of untapped intellectual potential out there, and that we have to do everything we can to cultivate it.

Because for every one of those young people around this nation who we can keep from going down that path of self-destruction, that's one less person we have to protect ourselves and our families from, one less person we have to pay for in the penal or the welfare system. One more tax-paying, productive

member of society who may discover a new energy source or the cure for cancer. We cannot afford to throw any of them away. They are all important parts of our society.

But as I entered high school, with all of this intellectual potential, I ran into perhaps the worst thing a young person can run into. It's called 'peers', negative peers. P-E-E-R-S. Stands for People who Encourage Errors, Rudeness and Stupidity. That's exactly what they were doing, and I got caught up in that, and my grades began to plummet. Fortunately, I only wasted one year before I came to my senses and began to recognize, again, those values and those principles that were going to drive me toward success.

But there were other problems. You know when I got to medical school, I was trying to fit myself into someone else's mold. On the first set of comprehensive exams, I did terribly. I was sent to see my counselor. He looked at my record and he said, "You seem like a very intelligent young man. I bet there are a lot of things you could do... outside of medicine."

He tried to convince me to drop out of medical school. He said, "You're not cut out to be a doctor, and it'll be so much easier for you and for everybody else if you drop out. We could actually help you get into another area of the university so you will not have wasted a year."

Well, you could imagine, I was devastated. I went back to my apartment, and I just said, "Lord, give me wisdom." I started thinking, and I said, "What kind of courses have you always done well in? What kind of courses have you struggled in?" And I realized I did well in courses where I did a lot of reading, and I struggled at courses where I listened to a lot of boring lectures. And there I was, listening to six to eight hours worth of boring lectures every day. So I made an executive decision to skip the boring lectures and to spend that time reading. The rest of medical school was a snap after that.

And some years later, when I went back to my medical school, as a commencement speaker, I was looking for that counselor because I was going to tell him he wasn't cut out to be a counselor.

There are so many people who are just negative, negative, negative, and they can always think of a reason why something can't be done, but they don't spend very much time figuring out how things can be done. And by the way, those of you who are graduating and going on to medical school, I am not advocating skipping your lectures, okay? What I am advocating is learning how you learn. We all learn in a different way. If we can do that, it will have a profound effect on how effective we are.

The other thing about persistence and clinging to your belief is a story I want to end with. Because this is the year 2012. 200 years since the start of the War of 1812.

And as you know, during the War of 1812, the British had decided that these younger whippersnappers in America were not worthy of independence. And that they should once again become a British colony. And they were winning that battle as they marched up the Eastern seaboard, conquering and destroying city after city, destroying Washington D.C., burning down the White House.

The next stop – the last bastion of defense – Fort McHenry. Baltimore Harbor. And as that armada of British battleship rolled into the Chesapeake Bay, gunships as far as the eye could see, it was indeed a bleak day.

General Armistead, the commanding general of Fort McHenry, had had a large American flag commissioned to fly over the fort, which incensed the British admiral. He said, "That's offensive to us. Take that flag down, or we will begin the bombardment of your fort, and we will continue the bombardment until that flag is reduced. It will become a pile of rubble."

Aboard that ship was a young amateur American poet by the name of Francis Scott Key, and he had overheard the British plans. He was onboard on a mission from President Madison to try to gain the release of an American physician who was being held captive.

They were not going to let him off the ship, since he had overheard the plans. And he knew that that evening, the bombardment would start. He mourned as

he thought about his fledgling young nation about to become a colony once again.

And that bombardment started as the sun went down. Bombs and missiles bursting in the air, it looked like the Fourth of July celebration. There was so much dust and debris, he strained his eyes to try to catch a glimpse of the fort to see if the flag was still flying, and could see nothing. All night long it continued.

At the crack of dawn, first thing, he was out at the railing, looking, trying to see through the debris, but it was too thick. As he hung his head, there was a clearing in the debris. And he saw the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. The stars and the stripes, still waving.

That was the beginning, many historians say, of the turning of the tide of the War of 1812. And we went on to win that war and to defend the principles of freedom that we believe in. And if you had gone to Fort McHenry that day, you would have seen on the ground the bodies of numerous American soldiers who took turns holding up that flag. They would not let that flag down. The epitome of persistence, which is what we must believe, and that will lead us to success.

And what is true success? In 1997, I was asked to come to South Africa to head a team in an attempt to separate Type II vertical craniopagus twins. Siamese twins, joined at the top of the head, facing in opposite directions. I knew it was going to be a great challenge. There had been 13 attempts to separate such twins before, none of which had been successful.

But it was also going to be a great social challenge, because it was going to be done at the medical university in South Africa, Medunsa, the only major black teaching hospital in South Africa. Always the stepchild through Apartheid and in the post-Apartheid period. This was going to be their chance to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Capetown, Johannesburg and all the other great universities.

And I wasn't ready for all that social pressure. I prayed for wisdom, and I looked at all the information we had. The angiograms, the MRIs, the CAT scans.

I used our 3D workbench to put all that together into a 3-dimensional image, put on the goggles, studied the vascular system.

I recognized that the common drainage system was narrower centrally than it was peripherally, and the traditional neurosurgical literature said that in such a situation, you should decide which twin to give the drainage system to, and divide them over the course of three or four operations, separated in time by weeks or months so that they could develop collateral circulation.

But I felt impressed that if we concentrated on the area where things were narrowing down, that they would develop collaterals immediately, and we could do it in one operation. When I explained that to the team, they said, "You're the boss, we'll do whatever you want." And I remember going to that operating room two days before New Year's of '98, big sign over the OR that said 'God bless Joseph and Luka Banda'. I was thrilled, and I said, "Bring in a stereo system so we can play inspirational music."

19 hours into that operation, we were only three-quarters of the way finished. The part that remained was so complex, the blood vessels were engorged, they were adhered, they were entangled, it looked impossible. We stopped the operation.

We talked about it, and I suggested maybe we could cover that area over with skin, and we could come back in several months and they would have developed enough collateral that we could then cut through that area. The doctors from South Africa and from Zambia said, "That's a great idea, but we don't have the ability to keep partially separated twins alive. They'll die."

Now I really felt the weight of the world on my shoulders, and I went back in there. I didn't have all my fancy equipment that I had at Hopkins. I had my scalpel, my loops, a prayer on my lips. I went in there and I started cutting between those vessels that were so thin, you could see the anesthetic bubbles coursing through, just daring you to make a nick in them.

Make a long story short, when I made the last cut that separated those twins, over the stereo system came the Hallelujah chorus. Everybody had

goosebumps. And when we finished that operation after 28 hours, one of the twins popped his eyes open, reached up for the endotracheal tube.

When we got to the ICU, the other one did the same thing. Within two days, they were extubated. Within 3 days, they were eating. Within 2 weeks, they were crawling. And this month, they will be graduating from the 9th grade.

But that was not the success. The success you had to be there to witness was the reaction of the people. This was done in their country and in their hospital. They were literally dancing in the street, their level of self-esteem was so high. And that's what true success is all about. It is using the talent that you have to elevate other people. Thank you, congratulations, God's peace.

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