President Susan R. Bailey, MD, inauguration address at June 2020 HOD Special Meeting

AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD

In her inauguration address at the June 2020 Special Meeting of House of Delegates, Susan Bailey, MD, shared how physician-heroes need to confront historical challenges.

Transcript

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The hero’s journey

Good afternoon and thank you for that warm introduction. And special thanks to our speakers Dr. Bruce Scott and Dr. Lisa Egbert for their incredible efforts in making today’s special meeting possible. The inauguration of a new AMA president is typically a very formal, black-tie affair with great celebration and fanfare. In my case, my family and close friends were all excited and ready to fly to Chicago to celebrate with me. I had a beautiful gown and Broadway entertainment and red velvet cake for dessert all picked out. My grandson was going to look so adorable in his tux, just like his daddy and his uncle did at his age when I became president of the Tarrant County Medical Society. I was planning one final bow with my predecessors, Doctors Patrice Harris and Barbara McAneny, capping our historic year with three consecutive women presidents. But the coronavirus had other plans. And seemingly overnight, our world changed. So here I stand, in a nearly empty studio, talking to you through a video screen. And that’s OK. As physicians we understand better than anyone how a health emergency can disrupt even the most carefully thought out plans.

No matter the circumstance, I am grateful to address you for the first time as AMA president, and I am so honored to carry the mantle of leadership for this organization I have been proud to serve for 40 years. On this journey to become AMA president, I’ve been asked who my heroes were growing up. We hear about heroes every day now, it seems. But what is a hero? Who were my heroes? I was never particularly into make-believe superheroes as a kid. It was real people in my life whom I most admired and emulated; the people who inspired me and pushed me to a life beyond anything I could
have imagined for myself. My heroes were my physicians. They were my first heroes and they're still my heroes. I had significant allergies and asthma as a little girl, and my allergists were a guiding light in our family. In fact, the McGovern Allergy Clinic in my hometown practically raised me, instilling in me a passion for medicine, and teaching me the basics about working in a medical office—how to take a patient’s history, perform allergy testing and how to give a damn good shot. I grew up in the shadow of the Texas Medical Center in Houston, and many of my friends’ dads were physicians. At that time, in the 1960s, it was always the dads. Thankfully now, it’s moms too. Although I rarely saw those physicians, I idolized them. After my father had double cardiac bypass surgery in the early seventies, one thing that sped his recovery was taking daily walks by the home of his surgeon, Dr. Jimmy Howell, in the hope that one day the doctor would see him and be proud of him. One day he did see my dad, and he was indeed proud of him and that kept daddy walking the rest of his life. Oh, how daddy—and our hero Dr. Howell—would be proud today. What we’ve witnessed in this pandemic and what we know from history is that heroes are defined by their ability to adapt to a changing world, to follow a righteous cause, to overcome immense challenges and to be changed by it forever. The author Joseph Campbell discusses this in his book, *Hero with a Thousand Faces* which describes the mythological hero’s journey in 12 stages, establishing the classic story line in everything from the original *Star Wars* trilogy and *Harry Potter* to *The Wizard of Oz*. As Campbell describes it, a hero starts off in the ordinary, familiar world, but gets a call to adventure. Think of a humble farm boy on Tatooine getting the call from Obi Wan Kenobi to help save Princess Leia. At first, our hero is reluctant, even fearful. But a supernatural force or mentor comes along and brings out the most in them. A threshold is crossed, and the adventure begins. Dorothy skips down the yellow brick road. On the way, our hero encounters challenges, finds allies and makes enemies. Eventually, he or she arrives at the ultimate test. Harry Potter confronts Voldemort face to face. This is a dangerous place, a dark place, a place where survival is as important as the ultimate goal. There is a fight to the death. Somehow, someway, the hero prevails, but the story is far from over. Going back to ordinary life is not easy, and there are many bumps in the road. But in the end, our hero emerges, transformed. Luke is a Jedi Master. Dorothy returns to Kansas. Harry lives out his life as a benevolent wizard. That’s the hero’s journey, and it’s been told a million times in a million different ways.

A hero’s journey is our journey, a physician’s journey. You start off as a young student, maybe already in another career, but at some point you hear the call of medical school. Somebody gives you a hand, maybe a teacher or a co-worker, and miraculously you’ve arrived as a first-year medical student. You feel like an imposter at first, and you wonder if you have made the biggest mistake of your life. Through wit and resourcefulness, you figure out how to be successful. You don the white coat and you make lifelong friends, all the while confronting clinical challenges that you fear might break you. At some point you confront the ultimate test. Maybe it’s having a relationship suffer because your priorities have changed. Maybe it’s not matching into the specialty or program you thought you wanted. Maybe it’s losing your first patient. You’re in a dark place and it seems there is no way out. But you keep going. You find your way out of the darkness, and you emerge a better physician and a stronger person for having endured these trials. You realize that you are making a difference in people’s lives. You are saving lives. You’re not the same person you were before you
went to medical school. You are a physician, and you’re following the hero’s journey. But here’s the thing—even heroes need allies on their sides. Luke needed R2D2. Harry Potter needed Hermione and Ron. Dorothy needed her ragtag crew. There isn’t a single person I know who walks this journey alone. My own allies are far too many to mention and thank in my limited time, but they include my husband Doug, who has been my greatest supporter and partner on this journey. They include my sons Michael and Stephen Wynn and Michael’s partner, Hannah Guel, my precious grandson Jackson, my sister Sally Rudd Ross and her beautiful family. They include my wonderful partners, Doctors Robert Rogers and Drew Beaty, my medical assistant Joyce Hayes and all of their families, and my lifelong friends from Texas A&M University and the Disciples of Christ church. And it of course includes my family in organized medicine, the Tarrant County Medical Society where I got my start, the Texas Medical Association, and my allergy and pediatric specialty societies the ACAAI, QuadAI and the AAP. Special thanks to Dr. Melissa Garretson for your friendship, hard work and dedication to help me make this journey possible. It also includes my family at the AMA, and all of those colleagues, confidants and executives along the way who have mentored me and become dear friends. I have not named you all by name, but please know you are forever in my heart. And like any hero’s journey, ours in medicine is simple: Let doctors be doctors. After more than 30 years in a small, private practice, I’m a passionate defender of the independent physician, and, like the AMA, I’m determined to remove all those obstacles that have come between us and our patients. Insurer and government mandates. Decreasing payments and increasing demands. Burnout and physician suicide. And the coronavirus pandemic has made all of these problems more acute. We need the power of the AMA on this journey. I believe involvement in organized medicine is a professional obligation, taking good care of our patients requires much more from us than the time we spend with them in an exam room. It requires advocacy at the highest levels to fight against the quagmire of regulation and for the support we need to sustain private practice during a pandemic that is threatening its very survival. It requires us to confront insurance companies and all their familiar tricks that seem to raise insurance premiums year after year without spending a dime more on patient care. At times I fear that our nation’s dysfunctional health system is held together only by the oath that we take when we graduate medical school, the pledge to always put the needs and interests of our patients first. Whether you took the Hippocratic Oath or, as in my case, recited the Prayer of Maimonides, these words demonstrate our loyalty to public service, to the pursuit of science and knowledge. These words bring purpose and meaning to our work, elevating it from a vocation to a profession. We are on a new quest that none of us expected—living and working in a world that may be changed forever, in a wounded, divided nation that needs our leadership. But we need not fear the dark times on our journey. We need only to lean on one another, to take care of each other and to keep our eyes fixed on the horizon. We will get through this pandemic. We will continue to fight for our patients and for the practice of medicine. This is our journey, and we will walk it together. Thank you.