

## The Society of Black Academic Surgeons

# The Asa Yancey lecture: swimming against the current: building strength through adversity

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*Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents; which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant.*

Horace (Roman poet, 65–8 BC)

President Stain, Distinguished Members, and Ladies and Gentlemen:

I stand before you today proud to have been given the privilege of honorary membership in this society and thankful to you for bestowing on me an honor that I shall always cherish.

I stand before you today extremely happy to have prevailed upon you to host the 2009 meeting of the Society of Black Academic Surgeons in Seattle. We most certainly hope you will feel welcome in the Emerald City and discover its jewel: the University of Washington.

I stand before you thankful to President Stain for having asked me to deliver the Asa Yancey Lecture during this, his meeting. I met Steve many years ago when he was a junior faculty member at the University of Southern California and have been delighted to see his meteoric progress in the world of academic surgery, now chair of a department, president of the Society of Black Academic Surgeons, and about to become chair of the American Board of Surgery.

Also, I stand before you humbled to honor Dr. Asa Yancey, a surgeon who embodies many of the values I shall discuss with you today. He was a pioneer, attending one of the top medical schools in this country at a time when it was not common for an African American to be able to do so. He was

an innovator, and developed the key changes in the Swenson surgery for megacolon, now known as the *Soave procedure*, publishing them in the *Journal of the National Medical Association*<sup>1</sup> some 12 years before Soave himself published his article.<sup>2</sup> He had the ability and the courage that allowed him to rise to leadership positions both at the Tuskegee Veterans Administration Hospital and at Emory, a testimony that adversity can be overcome with hard work and perseverance.

With President Stain's blessing I chose a topic that is very personal to me and I know is very personal to many of you here today: adversity and how we gain the strength to move forward. Because the SBAS bestowed an honorary membership upon me and because I do not know most of you, it seemed as if this was an appropriate occasion for me to share a piece of my life, to describe the first time I faced adversity and to reflect on ways that helped me overcome it and reach a position of leadership in our society.

My credentials on this subject are just 2: having been there and having carefully reflected on the ways that I used to navigate through difficulties. In the process I have borrowed thoughts from my own heroes and I will offer them to you throughout my presentation for they describe in a more elegant way what I truly believe.

I believe that we build strength when we face the barriers that are put in our path. My first encounter with a major barrier in the path of my life was the realization that I had to leave the country of my birth and start a new life in a totally different environment. I had been born in Argentina and I loved the country. Indeed, Argentina had much to offer: rich in natural resources and the second largest country in South America it used to enjoy a privileged financial, economic, and educational position. However, starting in the 1940s Argentina underwent a profound sociopolitical change. Repetitive military coups did away with democracy and created political chaos and instability. As the leadership eroded, or perhaps because of it, Argen-

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tina developed a moral crisis of unprecedented magnitude. People reacted to this moral crisis with a substantial change in attitude. Indeed, concern about themselves, egoism, disrespect for the rights of others, and acceptance of corruption became the norm for the average citizen, creating an environment I believed I could not accept. I tried my very best to change the prevailing attitudes that surrounded me, but I failed. Personal reasons beyond the scope of this talk made it imperative for me to leave the country of my birth and to try to start a completely new life when I was 27 years old. I felt the rug had been pulled out from under me.

I arrived in the United States on the morning of August 18th, 1975. My means were very limited, after selling all my worldly possessions I had purchased a 1-way ticket to New York and had \$92 left in my pockets. However, I had my medical education, I had completed my surgical residency, and I spoke English fairly well; thus, compared with other immigrants, I had a fair amount.

I had met Dr. David Skinner in 1971 in Argentina and written to him in 1975, confiding my need to leave. I had arranged for a job as an assistant in his laboratory. I still remember arriving at the train station in Chicago, a balmy 95°F, without a place to stay, without a friend, and with my very small amount of money. I had received a letter that directed me to go to the International House at the University of Chicago, but when I got there I learned they expected me to pay 3 days in advance and I did not have enough money. So, instead I returned to the hospital and waited there until the morning of the next day to meet my new boss.

That evening I found out that you never know what life has in store for you. Indeed, it was during that time of waiting and roaming around the hospital that I saw a sign with an offer of \$475 for someone willing to be a research subject. The sign indicated that I would have to stay in the research unit of the hospital for 14 days. The person would be allowed to leave the room, but needed to be available for blood draws every 6 hours and urine and stool collection. The investigators were studying the pharmacokinetics of a newly developed antidepressant. I thought this was manna, coming directly to me from Heaven! I volunteered and was accepted into the study, thus, instead of moving my only bag to the International House I moved directly into North 2, which then was the Clinical Research Unit at the University of Chicago Hospitals and Clinics.

Everything in life is relative, but think of my situation then and picture me that evening when I was alone in a large room, with access to free food, nice people looking after my needs, and even a television. I thought of myself as a king. When the psychiatrist investigators who were studying the effects of this new drug interviewed me the first day after injecting the drug and I told them I felt like a king, they exchanged looks that told me they would never have a clue of what my life had been—or was about to become.

During the initial 2 weeks I came to my laboratory very early, making sure that I was there before Dr. Skinner came to work and was there when he was leaving for home. When

I reluctantly left North 2, a rich man, with more than \$400, my original bag, and 2 bags full of nonperishable food, I rented my first studio and felt now more like an emperor. The next 6 months would define the rest of my life.

Indeed, it became apparent that I had impressed Dr. Skinner who slowly took me under his wing. As he started asking me questions of what I wanted to do I realized that I was telling him what I thought I could achieve, not necessarily what I wanted. I had always admired academic surgery and I had always wanted to be a professor of surgery. Eventually, I was able to articulate for him, and perhaps for myself, what my goals would have been if I had remained in Argentina. He promptly told me that if that was my goal, I should get my credentials and my credentials would be obtained only if I joined a residency program and essentially started all over again and repeated my surgical training. Initially, I was devastated by this prospect, but I decided to bite the bullet, to set my aim high, and to give myself a chance. I applied to every conceivable program, but it seemed that no one was interested in offering me even the possibility for an interview. I remember feeling shameful and down every time I received another thin letter with just a few lines of apology for not offering me an interview, but I went on and eventually I was offered a preliminary position at the University of Chicago in their internship program.

All of a sudden Chicago looked brighter to me, and after 1 year I got an offer to become a categorical resident, and by July of 1979, 4 years after I had arrived in the United States, I had completed a residency and was ready to take my boards.

As I reflect on my feelings during those first few years, the most prevalent sensation was that of having lost my anchor. What do I mean by that? As human beings grow up they develop language, modes of interaction, a taste for music, food, sounds, a way of living, a whole series of things that become the core of one's existence without ever really realizing this is happening. These things provide an anchor to life itself, much like health does. We do not think about health, but it is only because it is there that we can do all the things that we do and that we can enjoy life as we do.

When the anchor is down the boat is still, quiet, peaceful. Nobody thinks of the anchor, nobody talks about the anchor, but it is there. It is only if the anchor suddenly disappears that the boat starts drifting without a specific direction. It is only when one loses their health that one realizes what it was like to have it. That is what I think happens to human beings when they suddenly are uprooted from their traditions and immersed in a totally different environment. That was the root of my adversity, others, I am sure some in this room, have faced prejudice instead of uprooting, or losses in your life of one shape or another. I am firmly convinced that the ability to recover the anchor, as I call it, is the only way to inner peace and happiness. I was lucky to recover mine, I hope that those of you who may be sitting here today without one will do the same because that is what I think

you need to do first to overcome adversity, and to move forward in your life and your profession you have to have something that gives meaning to it all.

## Overcoming adversity

I will share with you some simple rules, some observations that I have either learned or stumbled upon during my life. These 8 rules (Table 1) deal with ways that I believe will best position a person to deal with, and eventually overcome, adversity. I have found that following these rules, one not only can overcome adversity but, most importantly, emerge on the other side stronger and better prepared for the next challenge; just like the swimmer who trains against the currents eventually develops the muscle that allows her to get ahead in the race. And, just like the swimmer, be prepared to lose some and hopefully to win some races.

### Rule 1

Get an anchor, something that will give you the stability that you need when the seas get rough, something that will always keep your upside up. My anchors are my wife and my 2 sons.

Simple? It is simple. So simple, yet so meaningful. This is my inner core, this is what gives meaning to my life. I invite you to ask yourself if you have that core—whatever it might be, because I submit to you that this is the single most important ingredient to be successful.

### Rule 2

Set your goals. Do not be afraid of setting them high. My good friend David Tapper, a fellow of the American College of Surgeons and the director of the College's Surgical Forum for many years, entitled his presidential address to the American Pediatric Surgical Association, "The Achievement of Audacious Goals."<sup>3</sup> In it he described how to set your aim high—how to define audacious goals, even if you

cannot reach them and you know so. At that time David knew that he was dying from cancer, but he believed that there was no reason not to continue in the general direction of the goals he had set for himself.

Setting a lofty goal provides you with a direction. In fact, I believe that one should be a dreamer when setting their goal, but one should be realistic when measuring the distance to the goal. Then, once the goal is set, keep moving towards that goal. It is easy to get off track.

Not just your enemies but also your friends, sometimes with the best of intentions, will try to distract you from the goal. Keep an eye on it. Having a clear direction in your professional life will dictate which committees you work on, which groups you join, to whom you say yes, and to whom you say no.

William Jennings Bryan said, "Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved."<sup>4</sup>

Also, Colin Powell, in his address to the graduating class of Morris High School in the Bronx said, "you can be anything you want to be. But wanting to be isn't enough. Dreaming about it isn't enough. You've got to study for it, work for it, fight for it with all your heart and soul. Reject the easy path of victimhood. Dare to take the harder path of work and commitment, a path that leads somewhere."<sup>5</sup>

### Rule 3

Get a mentor. A mentor will facilitate your navigation towards the goal you set.

During my formative years—my first 5 years in the United States—I had 2 incredible mentors. Notice that I said, "Get a mentor," I did not say, "Wait until someone comes to you and says, 'I want to be your mentor.'" That, my friends, does not happen.

As my good friend Norm Beauchamp, the Chair of Radiology at the University of Washington, says, you have to recruit your mentor. This process can be tricky. My recommendation is that you look for someone with whom you click and then try to get close to this person and show this person your own values and character. Mentorship is built in trust, it is an act of love in a way. It is not just receiving, it is a 2-way street. You want to find someone who enjoys doing what they do, who shows real pleasure in what they do. Only those who enjoy what they do will enjoy taking you there. As Norman Schwarzkopf so elegantly put it, "You can't help someone get up a hill without getting closer to the top yourself."

### Rule 4

Knock at the door. Do not be afraid of knocking and do not be discouraged if the door does not open. Knock again or move to another door. When I first applied for residency training I got nothing but rejection letters. It did not take me long to figure out that those doors, the traditional paths,

**Table 1** Eight rules

1. Get an anchor	Decide what gives meaning to your life
2. Set your goal	Aim high, follow the direction
3. Get a mentor	Do not wait for someone to come to you
4. Knock at the door	Seek opportunity
5. Take some risks	Do something with passion, defy the odds
6. Believe in yourself	Every person is unique, make a difference
7. Enjoy the process	Success is not a destination
8. Keep a balance	Put important things first

were going to remain closed to me, so I found another path. I started working with a number of attendings at the University of Chicago, and slowly convinced at least some of them that it was worth giving me a chance for a year.

### Rule 5

Take some risks in life. A life that is perfectly safe and without risks is unlikely to bring you the happiness you are after. Remember, a boat is always safer in the docks, but boats were not meant to be docked, they were meant to sail. The following quote, which has been attributed to Mark Twain, is a perfect example of what I mean, “Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”<sup>6</sup>

While we are talking about taking some risks, once in a while break the mold. Do not be afraid of doing something different, something others do not do, if you are convinced that it is right. I had immigrated to this country, I had fallen in love with the country, I was a surgeon, and we were at war. So, I joined the Army. I could use my skills and serve the United States, while serving the greater good of humanity. Some questioned the wisdom of my choice. They have the right to do it. Do not let that ever stop you from doing what you really want to do, what feels good to you. Not every day, not as a routine, but sometimes you have to break the mold. Surprise yourself, surprise your friends. Shock your enemies.

### Rule 6

Believe in yourself. You will not be able to follow rules 4 and 5 unless you also follow rule number 6: believe in yourself. Have faith in yourself. If you do not, you cannot ask others to believe in you, it is that simple. There is no mentor that will take you on if you do not believe in yourself. You are unique, because every human being is unique. Never underestimate your ability to make positive change. Act as if someone is watching, even if you know you are alone. Stop at a red light, even if it is 3 AM, be kind to someone even if you are never going to see this person again. You can make a difference—never forget that.

As you go through life and as you take risks you will occasionally fail. Failure will rock that belief in self. You should remember that failure is part of life. Take failure as another barrier that needs to be overcome, learn from failure, emerge from failure a stronger person. Thus, convert failure into a lesson, learn from it. If you do not fail, you will never know whether you can stand up.

There may be a time, however, for whatever reason, usually associated with 1 or 2 major failures, that your faith in yourself will really be shaken. If it ever gets that bad, and you do lose your confidence, then stop and go back to rule number 1: check your anchor, check your inner core.

If it is there, then you are okay. If it is not, then you need to find your anchor again and redefine your life. Some turn to religion, some turn to volunteering, some find another person to share their life with—it does not matter—you need the anchor and until you have defined it again, and differently if that is needed, you will not be able to move forward in a way that is meaningful to you. It may not be apparent to others, but you need to have your inner core to succeed for yourself.

### Rule 7

Enjoy the process. I often find that many of the human beings with whom I interact, students, residents, and faculty, in the early stages of their careers tend to postpone the enjoyment of their lives in pursuit of their goal. It is as if somehow, the prevailing idea is that once they reach their goal (usually the next step in their career), then life will begin in full. “Wait until I graduate,” or “Just wait until the residency is over,” is usually the excuse. I think you have to be careful because if you postpone the enjoyment until you reach some intermediate goal in your life, you may never have time to smell the flowers. There is always another thing to do, another hill to climb, another obstacle to negotiate.

American writer and businesswoman Satenig St. Marie said, “Success is never a destination—it is a journey.” Thus, my theory is that you look carefully at the process itself and ensure that your philosophy is centered in enjoying the process. Reaching goals should be celebrated as such, those great moments in life that bring joy and pride to a person and those who love that person. Just make certain it does not become an all-consuming affair and that some enjoyment is derived every day from your work. If you want to know whether you are in the right job, ask yourself if you are enjoying the process. When you stop enjoying the process for too long, you may want to redefine your goals.

To enjoy the process I have 4 pieces of advice. First, laugh, laugh often, and laugh a lot. Take your job seriously, but do not take yourself that seriously. Laugh, primarily at yourself. Make jokes once in a while and make others laugh. Laughter is healthy.

Second, do good for someone every time you can. Be kind. Be humble. In the end, kindness and humbleness will take you a lot further than arrogance.

Third, do not feel victimized. We can always find a reason to feel like a victim, “If I only had this . . .” and “if only . . . whatever.” Life is not meant to be fair. Crying about what others are doing to you will never elicit compassion. Take the problem as a challenge. Just think that you are swimming against the current—but put your mind at rest by thinking that because of it you will build more strength than the lucky ones who are going the easy way!

Fourth, get rid of prejudice. Accept others, interact with others, look for the good in others. I promise you will find it—at least most of the time. A few years ago I was corresponding with a friend in the United Kingdom about this

very issue. His e-mail to me touches the heart of this issue so clearly. "It always fascinates me that we all accumulate prejudices about people as members of ethnic, religious, social, and other groups, yet whichever company one enters there emerges a mix of wonderful inspiring people, intermediates—and villains" (RM Kirk, personal communication).

## Rule 8

Keep the balance. Easier said than done, isn't it? To explain what I mean by keeping the balance I would like to use a story that someone once told me. The story of a philosophy professor who is asked by her students to explain what balance is and how to keep balance in life.

Instead of talking, she picked up a very large and empty jar and proceeded to fill it with golf balls.

She then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was. So the professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. After shaking the jar a bit, the pebbles filled the open areas between the golf balls. The professor then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was.

The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. She asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous, "yes."

The professor then produced 2 cans of beer from under the table and poured the entire contents into the jar, which filled the empty spaces between the granules of sand.

The professor then said,

Now, I submit to you that this jar represents your life. The golf balls are the important things—your family, your children, your health, your friends, and your passions. These

are the things that provide an anchor to your life, the things that, even if you lost everything else, you would be willing to live for. The pebbles are the other things that matter like your job, your house, your car. The sand is everything else—the small stuff. The important thing to realize is that there is an order in your life. For example, if you put the sand in first, you can easily fill the jar with things that really do not matter and you would be unable to put the pebbles or, most importantly, the golf balls. In fact, unless the golf balls go first in the jar of life—they are left out. Pay attention to the things that are critical to your happiness. There will always be time for the smaller things.

One of the students raised her hand and inquired what the beer represented. The professor smiled. "I'm glad you asked. It just goes to show you that no matter how full your life may seem, there's always room for a couple of beers with your best friend."

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for allowing me to share a piece of my life and a few reflections with you today.

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