

**Northern Essex Community College Commencement Speech**  
**Dr. Eric Dickson, President and CEO, UMass Memorial Health**

Thank you..... As President Glenn mentioned, 34 years ago, I sat on this very lawn and heard my first college commencement speech. It was a very special day for my family and me ... and it is an absolute honor to be with you and your families...on your special day.

I am going to start by reading you a poem that I have had hanging on the wall next to my desk for many years. A poem that's meaning has changed for me given the events of the last two years.

“A Splendid Torch” by George Bernard Shaw: “This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no “brief candle” for me. It is a sort of splendid torch, which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

The Cliff note version of this poem would go something like this: If you want to be truly happy, work hard at something you believe in, don't be a whiner, and have nothing left in the tank when you die. I wonder if George Bernard Shaw had anything left in the tank when he died at age 94 after winning the Nobel prize in

literature and the Academy award for best screenplay. I wonder if he felt thoroughly used up. Based on everything I have read, he was still going strong at the end ... and just kind of...ran out of time.

Over the last two years, healthcare workers across the world have worked tirelessly for a mighty purpose. A purpose that has been meaningful beyond words and actions. It has been incredibly inspiring to watch them not only take great care of patients, but one another.

I have also watched some of my friends and colleagues in healthcare get used up and burned out fighting COVID.

But this commencement speech is not about them, but rather, those who emerged even more focused on caring for patients. They make me believe that Shaw got it wrong. That the goal is not to be used up, but rather, to run out of time fighting for something that matters to you. I don't think Mother Theresa, or Ghandi, or Martin Luther King felt used up or burned out fighting for their mighty purposes, caring for the poor, striving for peace and racial equity. I think they just ran out of time. For me, I think **the true joy in life is fighting for something you believe in. Staying attached to your mighty purpose doesn't use you up. It gives you the fuel you need to keep going.**

**So, what is your mighty purpose members of the class of 2022?** Unfortunately, there are lots of global challenges to choose from right now — climate change, social justice, health care for all? Having trouble deciding? That's okay. You can choose more than one.

One of my mighty purposes, that I hope will become one of yours, is doing everything I can to help young people achieve their wildest dreams. It is

something I learned here. Something that I personally benefited from. While I was a Respiratory Therapy student, I met Dr. Daniel Coleman, the medical director of our program. Dr. Coleman said seven simple words to me that changed my life's trajectory: "Dickson, you should go to medical school." He was the first person in my life who recommended that I become a doctor. His mere suggestion in that moment gave me the courage to start my career path toward becoming a physician.

As a college graduate, you will be seen by young people as a leader, and your encouragement and support may change the very trajectory of their lives. Sometimes we get so busy and forget to look and see if there is someone around us that needs a little encouragement. As you leave here today with your diplomas in hand, please be on the lookout for people, especially young, that are having a hard time believing that they can accomplish what you have accomplished – getting a college degree- and give them the encouragement they need to follow in your footsteps.

For many of the faculty of this great institution, helping you achieve your dream of graduating from college is their mighty purpose – and what an incredibly worthwhile purpose it is – now make them proud and do the same for others.

In my current role, I have been given the opportunity to fight for several mighty purposes that fuel me, including fighting for health equity, caring for people living in poverty and removing the stigma of mental illness and addiction disorders.

Not for one second do I feel used up by these things. Although I must admit that every once in a while, I get down and feel sorry for myself. Thankfully, all I have to do is go to the front door of one of our hospitals and wait for a patient who needs

help getting out of the car. I walk or wheel them to their appointment, talk to them about what is going on in their life, tell them that we are going to take great care of them and suddenly, my problems don't seem so bad. There is no mightier purpose than working to lift people up when they are down and there is no better medicine for when you are down than lifting people up.

You have a choice – You are at a crossroads of sorts to decide what your mighty purpose will be. Do you want to become an expert in climate change and find ways to save this wonderful planet we have been given? Do you want to become an advocate for racial justice? Do you want to provide health care as a doctor or nurse to the most under-resourced neighborhoods or to hold a patient's hand when you know there is nothing more you can do for them? Or do you want to become a teacher like Dr. Coleman and spark a moment of inspiration for a student like me?

The only wrong answer is to **not** attach yourself to something that brings you true happiness and makes the world a better place.

My final words of advice to you today are to go out into this world and find your mighty purpose – find the joy that makes you light that splendid torch for the rest of us to see, and make it burn as brightly as possible.

Congratulations class of 2022 and God bless all the healthcare workers out there!