

NOVEMBER 2019 COLLEGE OF HEALTH SCIENCES VALEDICTORY ADDRESS BY AMA

AKOMA ESSUMAN

The Chancellor

Chairman and Members of the University Council

The Vice-Chancellor

Pro-Vice Chancellors

The Registrar

Members of Convocation

Graduating Students

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am grateful and amazed that such a big responsibility and honour of being valedictorian for the Colleges of Health Sciences and Basic and Applied Sciences was bestowed on me. When I wrote my BECE in 2010, a sign which read, "Greatness does not depend on size", hang above the door of the examination venue. Perhaps, this has been proven true in my case, considering my size and the great platform on which I stand this morning.

Many of us graduands started together in the first year where all students of the Sciences took the same required courses. We were fresh and excited at our newly acquired independence until we started facing the realities it came with. You had to find your way to "Night Market" as the food will not find its way into your stomach. And interim assessments did not care whether you went for the lectures or not, or whether you stayed up all night studying. Along the way, we split into various sub-groups at different points, according to our chosen professions. The challenges continued. Ours was the time the support staff of the University embarked on a massive strike leaving us to sweep our classrooms and the school compound before lectures could begin. Ours was also the time almost all the College buses broke down. Students of the College had to compete for spaces on the few buses available, marking territories with books, bags, leaves from trees, sand and the occasional fork or spoon. As if that was not enough, the time came when all we had was the famous "Magic School Bus" and those who did not want to go by 'trotro' between Korle-Bu and Legon had to courageously stand on the stairs

at the entrance of the bus and hold on to the side mirror- or anything their hands could find for support- praying for safe arrival at their destination.

This journey to our degrees was fraught with challenges that required a display of inner fortitude, but today the memories bring laughter as we look back with the friends we made along the way, thanking God that we have arrived at the finishing line. Each one of us is here today because someone or a group of people believed in us, invested in us and helped us along our journey. The University has been the training ground for us for the last couple of years and for that we are grateful. The faculty who taught us and led us to our various professions and where necessary extended hands of friendship and encouragement, thank you. And to the students (those ahead of us, those with us and those behind us) who helped lighten our load in various ways, thank you. Today, both my parents are among the members of convocation. Believe me when I say they represent half the support and half the pressure that was a great motivation for me. (I won't say who is which half!) This is true not just for me. I believe I speak for my fellow graduands when I say to all loved ones, parents, guardians, spouses, children, siblings, friends and well-wishers: thank you for the equal parts of support and pressure you gave us. Thoughts of the sacrifices you made and the expectations you had were enough to keep us working hard to make you proud.

My middle name is Akoma. That is the Akan word for heart or in our medical parlance the - cardium or cardio - as in the word, cardiology. Akoma can also mean compassion or patience. However, my favourite meaning of the word is COURAGE, and that is the biggest lesson life has taught me in this University.

Members of the graduating class, take a moment to look around you. Look at one another. Behind these faces lie stories of courage, known and unknown. Sitting here today are men and women who were brave enough to come back to school after years of work, to pursue their dreams of being health professionals and agricultural scientists. Some got married. Some went on to have a baby or two. Some started businesses: restaurants, food blogs and barbering shops, while others started magazines and groups to enrich the lives of their colleagues. Some even

volunteered almost every week to teach and mentor 'kayayei' and their children in Accra. These are people who had the courage to love and to lose. Some even dared to try again. Through the years, some failed several times - wrote papers over and over, and found their names below the red line again and again. Yet they are here with us today because they picked themselves up and tried one more time. That is COURAGE!

We complain a lot about all that is wrong with the world and with our country. We complain about our leaders, forgetting that they are only a sample of our population. Maybe we forget that the allegedly corrupt leaders, angry doctors, screaming nurses, nonchalant allied health professionals and pharmacists, and dishonest scientists that we criticise so much also once had the opportunity as we have today to choose the kind of legacy to leave for our country. I hope we choose to continuously offer quality services to our clients - in knowledge, skill and attitude. I hope we have the courage to take care of ourselves too- saying no when we need to and learning to collaborate as we go along. And especially in the light of recent events, I hope we find the courage to seek help when we feel like we're going under. I did, and today I add my voice to the many trying to erase the stigma from mental health issues. Burnout and depression among healthcare workers are real and growing. We need help, and it's ok to go for it.

Still on courage, a line in the anthem of our university admonishes us to "proceed in truth and integrity". Living by this mantra in our world is difficult, especially in these times. It puts a person at risk of being odd and it takes a great deal of courage to stand by these words. Will you live in integrity even if that makes you unpopular? Will you speak true even if it lands you in unsolicited trouble? Unfortunately, this is not what we see around these days. Proceeding in truth and integrity requires suffering, sacrifice and service - loving service. This may seem challenging, yes, but it is the honourable way to go as we enter the world of work.

My aim here today, ladies and gentlemen, is to inspire us to live every day of the rest of our lives with courage. In a piece he wrote for GNOMIC magazine, my classmate, Dr Joseph K. Nyamison stated: "Never forget others will find their feet

when you stand. When one man finds courage, it quickly goes viral." To buttress this point, allow me to borrow the words of Marianne Deborah Williamson. This poem is very old and cliché but its words still ring true and will for generations to come. In these words, I find the strength to stand fear in the face.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate; our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?" Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

So, after 4 or 6 years of gruelling training (or maybe longer, because it certainly hasn't been an easy ride for all of us), November 2019 is here... and so are we! And on this 15th day of November, as the team of scientists from this class of 2019, groomed, bred and duly launched from the University of Ghana, Legon in the heart of Accra, we say, "Watch out world; here we come!" Thank you.