Northeastern University PA Graduation, August 2014

Speaker: Erin Sharaf

Family, friends, honored guests…Class of 2014…

Thank you so much for inviting me to be with you on this very special day. It is truly an honor and a privilege.

ALL of us in this room have an investment in this celebration. Some provided emotional support. some gave financial support, some worked really hard behind the scenes on administrative details, some of us taught you in the classroom or precepted you on your clinical rotations, some moved across country to be with you. But all of us have been invested in getting to this day, this very moment in time, and we’ll never all be assembled like this again, so just to make sure we don’t miss it…let’s close our eyes and take a few deep breaths that ground us here in the present… notice all the excitement in the air, maybe in your own body…

You can keep your eyes closed…Now that we’re all fully present I invite everyone to set an intention for these graduates, what is your deepest desire for them as they embark on this next phase of their lives. Graduates you can set one for yourselves too but also soak in all the love coming at you from everywhere in this room right now.

I know most of you have actual biological family with you here today, but I feel like I have 40 family members graduating and I am just so proud of each and every one of you.

Traditionally these speeches are about giving you some words of wisdom, and I do have some of those, but first I want to start by honoring you all and what you’ve accomplished.

It seems like just yesterday you came to 202 Robinson Hall for your interview. It’s hard to believe it was over 2 ½ years ago. You all looked so cute in your dark suits and your briefcases. And you were so nervous but after meeting you, we knew that out of the over 800 people who applied, YOU were truly the best of the best. We chose you and you chose us and the journey began. And then 2 years ago you showed up in Behrakis Hall for Boot camp and the adventure really began. You all got to know each other very quickly (sports bras and all) and before long the initial look of eager anticipation gave way to shell-shocked terror with a touch of despair and disbelief. But we assured you that this was all very normal and that you’d not only make it through but that you’d do so with flying colors, and indeed you all did just that and here we are celebrating today.

The absolute best part of my job has been watching you go from insecure but brave fledglings in the first rotation or 2, to just starting to test your wings in the second semester, to really soaring in your last semester; soaring to the extent that I know some of you have made diagnoses that even the senior attendings missed; soaring so high that you were chosen to first assist, even above medical students, interns and residents from a very prestigious institution just across the Charles. You Soared so high that you were recruited (OK, begged) to stay on and work in the department where you did your rotation; You shocked some of your preceptors into picking up the phone to call me and ask things like “How do they know so much already?” How are they so good when they’re just students”? I just told them that you were all very amazing to start with and that Northeastern is still the very best PA program around.

I know that out of everyone on the medical team, it was often you that the patient looked to for advice and comfort. You were the one they trusted. Yours was the hand they wanted to hold. I know that you were sometimes the one who took the time to find that one little detail that made all the difference in the care of the patient. You touched lives and you’ve been touched. You’ve stretched and grown and accomplished things that I think maybe you never even thought you could do, and you are just beginning. You were blessed to be able to be of service to others in some of the most intimate times of their lives such as births and deaths and there is no greater privilege. Through it all you’ve handled yourselves with grace and you’ve been beautiful ambassadors for the program. For all these reasons, and too many more to mention, I am grateful to have played a small part in this process.

Now for all the family members here, it’s not fair for me to paint an unrealistically rosy picture. Truth be told, there was also some nausea and vomiting, many sleepless nights, a few car accidents and getting stuck in ditches on the rural rotations, and even some fainting in the OR. These will all make great stories to tell your kids someday OR even better to tell your own PA students once you start precepting.

Today you are deservedly proud of all your hard work and of the fact that soon you’ll be able to call yourself a PA-C. However, don’t let the title of PA-as wonderful as it is- best master’s degree to have right now according to Forbes magazine, don’t let the title limit you or even define you as you are so much more than a PA.

What you actually are, are healers. That’s what made you stand out in the interviews and that’s what made you so impressive already to patients and preceptors.

And the healers are an integral part of the work that needs to be done on the planet right now. From a historical perspective and still in many cultures, the healers are the leaders and the decision makers that people respect and look to for advice. Your voice is no less valuable than anyone else’s, no matter how many letters they have after their name or what title they have. The world that you’re entering is one of exceedingly rapid change. The good news is that you have a chance to impact the trajectory of things, not just in medicine but in society as a whole.

Since our time together today is relatively short, and there is so much advice I’d love to give you, I thought I’d start from the end and work backwards. What do I mean by that? Well, You know how fast the past 2 years flew by? Most people feel like things keep going faster and faster as they get older and Before you know it you’re looking back and wondering what you did with your one wild and precious life. Someone who worked in palliative care surveyed those at the end of their lives and asked them what they what they would do differently if they had the chance. Some clear patterns emerged so a book was written about the top 5 and they kind of give a nice framework to some of the main things I wanted to share with you today.

The first one is

1. **I wish I Had had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.**

Each of you has a precious contribution to make that is yours and yours alone. That contribution will be lost if you don’t follow YOUR own unique path, even if it doesn’t make sense to anyone else.

How do you know what your path is? You need to give yourself quiet time regularly to connect with your deep truths and nourish them. The dark, quiet places are where the treasure is always buried. Be careful not to let others’ expectations override your own knowing.

1. **I wish I hadn’t worked so hard.**

**I don’t think anyone at the end of their life wishes they had worked more.**

It is imperative that you take good care of yourselves and create balance in your life; not just for you but for all, as people will be looking to you as examples. Make room for play, adequate sleep, and laughter. Get dirty, wander, unplug every once in a while. Do not apologize for these things.

Whatever lights you up…do that! Regularly. When you’re fully lit up, you give permission to others to do the same. You will not regret making room for joy.

1. **I wish I Had the courage to express my feelings.**

**Do not be afraid to speak your truth.** Courage and integrity are called for now as we hospice many of the old ways of doing things and midwife a new world order.

Keep your courage in an easily accessible place and exercise it regularly so it doesn’t atrophy. You will need your courage to stay true to yourself so that you don’t fall into resonance with those who are scared. The healers need to be shining examples of the more beautiful world we all know is possible.

You express yourself in every moment. By what you say Yes to and what you say No to. By what you worship by giving it the most precious thing you have: your attention and your presence.

Pay attention to the little things because how you do anything is how you do everything.

**4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.**

The happiest people on earth have the strongest sense of community. They celebrate. They gather. They support each other. We’ve lost some of this in our ruggedly individualistic culture and we’re suffering for it.

Our ancestors knew instinctively that community was important. We’re hardwired this way. Find your tribe and nurture it on a regular basis.

**5. I wish I had Let myself be happier.**

**Some of the wisest people in the world espouse this belief. The 16th century poet Rumi said that the soul is here for its own joy. Mary Oliver says that joy isn’t meant to be a crumb. I had the incredible thrill of getting to hear Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak when I was in Africa this summer. He says:**

“We were made to enjoy music, to enjoy beautiful sunsets, to enjoy looking at the billows of the sea and to be thrilled with a rose that is bedecked with dew… Human beings are actually created for the transcendent, for the sublime, for the beautiful, for the truthful... and all of us are given the task of trying to make this world a little more hospitable to these beautiful things.”

**So never become complacent about cultivating your happiness, have a reverence for it.. water the seeds of your happiness-every day, There is nothing more important that you could be doing.**

**And so, as you leave Northeastern to make your own unique mark on the world,**

**My deepest wish for you is that you will continue to inspire and be inspired,**

**That you’ll commit to your own ongoing healing so that your wholeness can be held out as an example to those who entrust you with their suffering.**

**I hope that each of you keeps evolving and growing in the direction of the very best and brightest version of yourself.**

**I hope that you will practice gratitude and wonder on a regular basis at the wildly improbable miraculousness of just being here at all.**

**I hope that you’ll set an intention everyday and that it will be about something bigger than your self.**

**I hope you never forget that at all times, you’re being carried on great winds across the sky.**

**I wish you more love and light than you ever dreamed possible and I hope you blow your own minds with all that you’re capable of…not just as PAs but as human beings.**

# **I’d like to end with some words by the14th century poet Hafiz:**

# Even after all this time, The sun never says to the earth, 'You owe me.' Look what happens with a love like that. It lights up the whole sky.”

# Go shine your light, Northeastern PA class of 2014.

**Thank you.**