Congratulations Doctors! And congratulations to the supporters of our Doctors! Our shiny new veterinarians are ready to start their careers!

I’m very grateful to the Class of 2011 for selecting me to be the recipient of the Pfizer Teaching Award and for giving me this opportunity to speak to you one last time. I have three pearls of wisdom that I’d like to to share with you, to give you something to think about and perhaps to help you in the many years ahead.

Pearl #1: Enjoy and embrace your new role in society. Many surveys have shown that the public holds the veterinary profession in very high regard. According to studies on professional esteem, people tend to make the following assumptions about veterinarians: they’re smart (everyone knows that it’s difficult to be accepted into vet school), they’re hard-working (they made it through vet school), veterinarians are also considered to be among the most ethical of professionals, and they’re also believed to be among the most compassionate of professionals. So when you add these qualities (smart, hard-working, highly ethical, and compassionate) to the obvious fact that veterinarians are animal lovers, you have quite a potent combination of characteristics!

So as a veterinarian you have a sort of instant credibility, whether you’re in a hospital setting or out on the street. That’s something to be proud of, but with that instant credibility comes great responsibility. The high esteem in which the public holds the veterinary profession has been earned by the great work done of thousands of veterinarians who came before you. So it is now your turn to do your part to continue to earn that respect. So remember those veterinarians who came before you, work hard, do your best, stay on the moral high ground, and always strive to demonstrate that you’re a doctor who really cares.

Pearl #2: Be prepared, your career may evolve in a direction you never expected! Now, it’s possible that you’ll find nirvana in the first job you take. Just this week I talked on the phone to an alumnus to discuss a case he had referred to the surgery service. After we were done with our medical discussion I asked him how long he’d been working at his practice. He thought for awhile, did a little mental math and then said, “Amazing, I’ve been here for 18 years, ever since graduation”. Now that ‘s great, he found the perfect job right out of school and he’s enjoyed it so much that the time has just flown by. And certainly there are many veterinarians who have been able to work in the same practice for 20, 30, or even 40 years. We can all hope for that sort of career stability, but it’s certainly possible that things may work out differently, and that’s OK.
There are many examples of veterinarians successfully changing their location, their specialty, or even their species focus. Personal or family situations might require a new locale. Food animal private practice might transform into a government job in public health. I remember a Cornell vet student some years ago who became an academician and he found himself enamored with the emerging internet. His interest in education meshed with his passion for the internet and this lead him to create a little web site we all know as VIN, the world’s most widely used electronic veterinary information source. It’s sort of a full-time job for him now. My dear wife, Dr. Moise, started her career as a small animal practitioner in Houston, Texas, and now she’s an academic veterinary cardiologist at Cornell. When I graduated from veterinary school I was planning to come to Cornell for a year and then go back to San Francisco and open up a feline specialty practice. Instead, during my internship I became very interested in surgery, so I stayed at Cornell to pursue specialty training, and I also stayed at Cornell to pursue Dr. Moise!

Career evolution can occur without requiring a major change in your life. If you’re in private practice, keep your career evolving through continuing education. Don’t look at CE as just a chance to take a tax-deductible trip to Tahiti, take the opportunity to learn new skills. This can be a small thing like learning about a new medication for treating renal failure, or training in endoscopy, laser surgery, or maybe something completely different, like Eastern Medicine. Just think, you could be Dr. Nathan Hill, Veterinary Acupuncturist!

No matter where you are or what facet of veterinary medicine you’re in, keep your job stimulating by allowing your career to evolve.

Pearl #3: The final pearl requires that I tell you a little story. This is a true story that happened to me when I was a senior in vet school at UC Davis. One Saturday evening in late autumn two of my classmates and I decided that we needed to relax a bit and check out a new Mexican restaurant that had opened up in Sacramento. Sacramento is about 11 miles east of Davis and is connected to Davis by a large 6-lane freeway, route 80. So we all piled in my red 1964 Volkswagon Bug and I drove us to the restaurant. The food wasn’t bad and the beer was pretty good, so we were pleased overall. On the way home we were all in a contented daze from our meal. It was dark and there were very few cars on Rte 80. There was a big 18-wheeler chugging along about a quarter mile behind us in the slow lane. I was in the second lane cruising at top speed (which was about 68 mph) in my VW. There was a gentle rain falling, the radio in my car didn’t work so we just listened to the windshield wipers clacking time and then all of a sudden, whoomp! My right front tire exploded! We all snapped to rigid attention and I tried to remember the best course of action. Don’t hit the brakes; take your foot off the accelerator, ease over to the side of the road.
The only problem was that as we slowed down the big 18 wheeler started catching up with us on the right, so I had to keep the bug going straight ahead until the truck passed. Unfortunately my bug had other plans. All of a sudden, as the truck was almost even with us, my VW spun 180 degrees into the first lane of the freeway putting us face-to-face with the oncoming rig! Time stood still for a moment as I looked up and saw the huge truck about to crush us, and I swear I saw God! Appropriately enough, God was in the form of a silver bulldog perched on top of the radiator of that truck, and had his name posted underneath him: Mack. I thought to myself “is the end?” But the answer must have been “NOT NOW JIM” because we suddenly spun another 180 degrees out of the path of the oncoming truck and smashed into the guard rail. The truck zoomed on ahead.

Amazingly enough, we were all OK, we scrambled out of the bug through the driver’s side door. Just at the same time, the totally shocked truck driver came running up to see if were all still alive. He had pulled his rig over a few hundred yards up the freeway. We calmed him down and he stayed and helped us move the bug away from the guard rail. We were able to bend out the fender, replace the flat tire and I drove the VW the rest of the way home.

So, the moral of this story is what happened during the next few days. As a result of my brush with death I became SO APPRECIATIVE of just being alive. I appreciated, my heart was beating, my lungs were working, and smells were so sweet, views so beautiful, all of my classmates were suddenly the most fabulous people in the world! Unfortunately, that state of heightened awareness lasted only for a couple of days and then life’s little issues took over. But even now I sometimes recollect that incident and I take a moment to appreciate all of the basic gifts I have, and it’s a wonderful feeling.

So that is Pearl #3: Always take a little time to appreciate the simple things, especially if life gets a little rough. You’ve got your friends, your family, your pets, your heart is beating, your lungs are working, life is good.

So, Class of 2011, I leave you now with your 3 pearls: Honor your profession, be prepared for changes in your career, and appreciate all of the gifts you’ve received in life. I wish you all the best of luck. Do us proud out there!