



7-1-2012

Remarks of Amy I. Attas, V.M.D., '87 at the Commencement Exercises of Penn Vet, May 14, 2012

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University of Pennsylvania

commencement

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Thank you very much Dean Hendricks. And my congratulations to the class of 2012 and your families.

Twenty five years ago – almost exactly to this day – I sat right where you are sitting, just about... *there*. Today, even though I have the extraordinary honor of being on the other side of this podium, I still have the same excitement and enthusiasm about my profession that each of you has today about your future as veterinarians.

We who become veterinarians are frankly different from other people. We have big hearts, and we are full of compassion for the other occupants of this fragile planet. Uniquely, we typically know from a very early age that this is what we must do with our lives. For example, when other little girls were playing with dolls, I was giving injections to my first patients – perfectly healthy stuffed animals – and soon my parents forbade me from ever again wrapping Ace bandages around the family dog.

In my 25 years as a veterinarian, most of them devoted to a unique practice of NYC house calls, this profession – your profession – has given me more than I could have ever dreamed those many years ago when I sat in your seats.

It is true that as a young vet I thought it was “all about the animals.” I have learned since that it’s also about something much bigger. It’s about what we can – and should – do, not only for the animals but also for their families and even for the wider world in which they live.

Let me tell you a story to illustrate my point. It is the story of Mrs. Blum, a long-time client in my housecall practice. Housecalls were perfect for Mrs. Blum because she was 90 years old, housebound and very frail. She lived all alone and no longer had any living friends or even family. However, she did have her companion Maggy, a sweet 18 year old toy poodle, whom she loved dearly.

Maybe *too* dearly. She had once said to me that she was staying alive just to care for Maggy. And I believe she was telling the truth.

Mrs. Blum called us one day to say that Maggy wasn’t eating. Stat blood tests revealed that Maggie’s problem was much more serious than simply being off her feed; Maggy was in both kidney failure and heart failure, and there was nothing I could do to treat Mrs. Blum’s precious companion. She agreed to put Maggy to sleep for her own good.

At home, I couldn’t stop thinking about frail Mrs. Blum, now totally alone and without her reason to live. I feared for her – truly – and so I went to see her about a week later and was shocked at what I found. She told me that she had not gotten out of bed for most of the week, and I was certain she hadn’t eaten perhaps since Maggy was put to sleep.

It appeared to me as if Mrs. Blum had indeed lost her reason to live.

I don’t need to recite to this group all of the research that proves that people live longer and healthier lives when they have pets. I knew I simply had to get Mrs. Blum another dog, but I also knew that Mrs. Blum would say no. I found and enlisted her priest to broach the idea with her. Then, I called in all of my favors from the dog rescue world and within 48 hours I had Pierre, an 8 year old, tiny toy poodle.

I brought him to her. Mrs. Blum thanked me sweetly, but said “No, I am too old to love again.”

I pressed. Again she said no, and finally she admitted in a small voice that she feared it would simply be cruel to Pierre to be left alone when she herself passed on, an event she plainly contemplated. I gently explained that Pierre’s alternative as a rescue was likely to be much worse.

I asked her to keep him just for a few days until I found a home for him with ‘younger’ people. Then, I just placed him in her arms and turned to walk out without waiting for her answer. As I did, I saw from the corner of my eye Pierre giving Mrs. Blum a big wet kiss.

The next morning I phoned her and before I could even say a word, Mrs. Blum said to me: “Dr. Amy, it’s a very good thing that you brought him to me; he needed a home”.



And a home is what he got. Pierre was Mrs. Blum's constant companion for the next two years, during which time she had a remarkably happy – and healthy – life.

I know that all of you are smart, ready professionals. Our wonderful alma mater has seen to that. But it is possible to be more. Remember, often it's the *people* – as well as the animals – who need you.

Sometimes this means going the extra distance to further the special bond between people and their pets. And sometimes – *sometimes* – this means speaking out about the wider world still.

In my life this means not only being on the board of my local veterinary association, but also working with the Humane Society to develop national programs to end the cruelty of puppy mills; and donating my services to animal rescue efforts; and raising awareness – and even money – from my own clients for international wildlife conservation and protection.

We are first and foremost *animal health advocates*. And this means not only treating and protecting *them*, but, also, giving our professional and big-hearted attention to their families and to the world in which they all live.

One of the beautiful surprises in our profession (which I'm tipping you off to today) is the realization that you as a veterinarian have a special voice as well as a unique opportunity to use it to make this world better.

So please use it; use this special voice in all its forms. You will be amazed how it enhances not only the world in which our beloved kindred creatures live, but also your own lives.

I want to thank you Dean Hendricks for this truly wonderful opportunity to share some of my inspirations with the Class of 2012. This is both a professional and very personal honor.

And so on behalf of the Board of Overseers of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, I wish you all as much joy and fulfillment in your careers as veterinarians as I have in my own. ♥

