School of Public Health: Commencement

April 24, 2008

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Introduction by Dean Ken Warner

Good evening. I'm Ken Warner, Dean of the University of Michigan School of Public Health. It is a pleasure to welcome you to Hill Auditorium for our celebration of the graduation of the class of 2008. This is the first time that we have held commencement in this magnificent, recently remodeled University facility. I hope that the elegance of this historic building will add to your enjoyment of this very special evening.

This is the day we rejoice in the achievements of every student who has earned a degree at this most distinguished institution.

You have been remarkable students, and we are pleased that you chose the University of Michigan School of Public Health for this phase of your education.

For all of you wonderfully supportive relatives and friends, let me tell you a few things about the class that is graduating this weekend.

Introduction to Commencement Speaker Larry Brilliant

This evening I have the distinct honor and great pleasure of introducing Dr. Larry Brilliant, executive director of Google.org, who will deliver our commencement address.

Tonight's speaker may look like an ordinary man, but there is nothing ordinary about Larry Brilliant. Dr. Brilliant's accomplishments are so vast that I could easily spend the next hour or so recounting them; but then you'd be late getting your degrees, and late starting your public health careers. Dr. Brilliant wouldn't want that. He wants you to get to work right away. And to work very, very hard.

That said, I have to spend a little time telling you something about this remarkable human being – probably more time than he would prefer. If you want more details on his life and career than I'm going to provide, check out his Wikipedia entry – yes, he does have one – or read the feature article on him published just last week in *Rolling Stone*.

Let me just tell you a bit about how Dr. Brilliant started *his* career. Back in the late 1960s, not long after he'd finished medical school at Wayne State University, Larry and his wife, Girija, drove to Asia with a group of friends, in a bus that they'd painted in psychedelic colors.

They ended up in India, where they joined an ashram and developed a deep relationship with their guru, Maharaj-ji. Larry and Girija eventually wound up

joining the United Nations campaign to vanquish smallpox. They spent a total of nearly 10 years in India, helping officials from the World Health Organization scour the country for hidden cases of the disease. They traveled to dozens of cities and hundreds of remote villages. They endured floods, drought, sickness, and fatigue. And when they were finished, smallpox had been eradicated.

Now I don't mean to suggest that Larry and Girija Brilliant single-handedly wiped out smallpox. They did not. They were part of a massive and historic public health effort, and they *did* play a major role in that effort.

Girija Brilliant could not be with us tonight, as she is recovering from surgery. We send her our love and best wishes for a speedy recovery. We are very pleased, however, to have the Brilliant family represented in the audience in the form of Larry and Girija's daughter, Iris. Iris is an undergraduate here at the University of Michigan.

Those years in India were a turning point for Larry and Girija. The experience motivated them to further their public health education. They were both from Michigan, and as everyone in this room knows, the University of Michigan has the finest school of public health in the nation. So the Brilliants came to Ann Arbor.

Girija earned her MPH and PhD degrees from the School of Public Health, and Larry earned his MPH from our school.

So that's how Dr. Brilliant began his remarkable career in public health. More than 3 decades later, that career is still going strong. Indeed, it is scaling new heights. Let me list just a few of the highlights:

- While still a student here at Michigan, Dr. Brilliant co-founded the SEVA Foundation, an organization he went on to direct for many years. Since its founding in 1978, SEVA has helped fund *two and a half million* eye operations worldwide, most of them sight-giving cataract surgeries for people living in some of the world's poorest countries.

  In addition to blindness prevention and treatment, SEVA helps indigenous communities in Central America combat poverty and injustice and gives support to Native American communities across the United States.

- When a catastrophic tsunami struck southeast Asia in 2004, Dr. Brilliant immediately flew to the region and spent several months living and working in refugee camps in Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

- A year later, Dr. Brilliant helped conduct polio vaccinations in India.

- He was a first responder for the CDC's smallpox bioterrorism response effort.

- Dr. Brilliant has received awards from the government of India and from the World Health Organization. The University of California recently named Larry Brilliant an International Public Health Hero.

- And in 2006, the leaders of the technology and entertainment industries awarded him their prestigious TED Prize, for his work in pioneering new technologies. If you have the chance, google Larry's TED Prize acceptance speech video. I saw it more than two years ago, and I still feel inspired by it, and I think about it often.

Dr. Brilliant was an outstanding student here. I should know. I taught him economics, and a few years later, when he served briefly on the School's faculty, he taught me epidemiology. He has been a valued member of our alumni ever since he graduated. Recently, he agreed to be a member of the External Advisory Council of the University of Michigan's new Center for Global Health. I know that his wisdom and experience will be an enormous help to the leaders of that new center as they move forward with their important work.

Larry Brilliant will be the first to tell you that he is an unorthodox blend of 1960s idealism, 1990s entrepreneurship, and 21st-century technological know-how.

It seems to me that's exactly the kind of combination the world needs if we are to find solutions to our most pressing problems. Problems like poverty. Health disparities. Global warming. Those are precisely the issues that Google.org, under Dr. Brilliant's leadership, has made its top priorities.

When the leaders of Google launched a search for someone to lead their unique $1billion-plus philanthropic arm, Google.org, they needed a unique and uniquely talented person to run it. That man is with us here tonight, and we are fortunate indeed to have him.

Please join me in welcoming our valued alumnus, and my very dear friend, Larry Brilliant.

Commencement Speech by Dr. Larry Brilliant

Dean Warner, colleagues from the University of Michigan faculty, friends, Class of 2008 parents and supporters, and most of all – to you, the 377 graduates of the

class of 2008: thank you for inviting me to share this day celebrating your graduation from the most wonderful school of public health in the land.

Graduates, today, as soon as I get out of your way, you will receive a degree that is honored around the world.

Today, as you celebrate with friends and family, I have one goal for my remarks:

I want you to think of your profession, public health, in the most expansive way that you can. I want you to enlarge the boundaries of traditional public health as wide and long as you can imagine.

My wife and I have four Michigan degrees between us. We both received MPHs here and I was proud to be a faculty member for nearly a decade. My office was in the basement at Observatory Lodge, the door plastered with all those colorful hippie decals - peace symbols, a smorgasbord of religions, and the Seva Foundation rainbow decal.

Yes. That was my office. Across the street from the University. They wanted to keep me arms length distance from the rest of the School. So that when I got into trouble – inevitably - they would have, er, ahh….. plausible deniability.

I had been living in India for nearly ten years, working in the WHO smallpox program. After we eradicated smallpox, I wanted to come to U of M to learn more about international health and epidemiology.

When I was a student, Dean Ken Warner taught me Economics. When I was on the faculty, I taught Ken Warner epidemiology.

That's probably why neither of us could ever get real jobs after that!

Last year, Ken gave me a gift of that old office door. They said they were tearing down the building but I think they wanted finally to be rid of all those hippie decals. Ken said I was always welcome back, but why did it feel like he was… showing me the door?

Well today, you graduates will be walking through a very different door. A door to the future. A door to a noble profession. A door to a 21st century world which needs you so very much.

From this moment -- whether your jobs take you to a county health department, a research lab, or door-to-door in a developing country village or slum, or to work in a hospital or academic setting – whatever door you go through you'll be joining some great women and men who solved some of the world's greatest public health problems.

Today you will do more than go through the door marked "Public Health." Today you join a movement. A noble, fulfilling, and incredibly important movement to heal the world, and care for the health of all people.

Believe it or not, I joined this same movement here in this very room 45 years ago on this parquet floor of Hill Auditorium.

I was an undergrad, a sophomore. It was one of those days with sheets of rain and sleet shooting sideways and ice and slush still on the ground.

The playwright Arthur Miller once wrote that "under certain atmospheric conditions, it is possible to ice skate from one end of Ann Arbor to the other." It was that kind of day. It was a terrible day to walk anywhere. No one wanted to go outside. But I was 19 years old. My father was at home in Detroit dying of cancer and I was seeking reasons for hope.

Martin Luther King was to speak in Hall Auditorium. I trudged through the sleet and rain and got here, but few students and fewer faculty came. This magnificent hall seats nearly 3,000. But when King was introduced, he looked out at empty chairs. He gazed at the handful of us, who had braved the weather, and laughed so hard, so genuinely. He called us all to come up and sit with him on this stage. We sat in a circle around him and he spoke to us of a dream of a country without discrimination, where every woman and man was treated equally. His words were poetry - we felt as if he were transmitting an ancient wisdom, a calling, a commitment, a future. We sat still as stone for hours. No one dared to breathe. It was a magical moment.

Hearing Dr. King speak was an invitation, a commencement, an initiation into a new way of life.

None of us who were on this stage with him that day, would ever be the same again.

That day, here at Hill, on this stage, without knowing it, I joined a Movement. For the health of all people, for civil rights, for racial equality. For women's rights, and gay rights, and to fight for the health of the neglected. I changed my major from nuclear physics to philosophy and ethics. I joined an alphabet soup of student antiwar and civil rights groups: SNCC, CORE, NAACP. In my freshman year in

medical school I joined the group of doctors who accompanied Dr. King wherever he marched: MCHR - the Medical Committee for Human Rights.

Wearing my white coat and a borrowed stethoscope, I got arrested in Chicago with Martin Luther King and hundreds of others marching against the Vietnam War. Two doctors who were arrested with me were in public health; it was the first time I met any doctor who was not a clinician.

Times have changed but the major issues have not. It is still the case today that your profession, improving the health of all the public, includes fighting for equal health services regardless of nation, religion, gender, sexual preference and without respect for social or economic status.

Always remember this too is part of public health.

Now I admit that career paths in the Sixties were different. When I finished my internship I built free clinics for La Raza, and for black and native American activists, but it being the Sixties, I then took a bit part as an actor - in a terrible Warner Brothers movie called Medicine Ball Caravan; and I played a young doctor working with rock and roll bands. I lived in a commune and traveled on buses from London through Europe, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. I spent two years in a Himalayan ashram studying eastern religions.

But, hey, that was the normal career path in the Sixties. Everybody did it.

One day in the monastery, my guru tugged on my beard and told me to leave the ashram. He told me it was my destiny to join the United Nations and that this team of public health workers would eradicate smallpox.

Smallpox was in many ways the worst disease in human history. In the preceding Century, smallpox had killed more than half a billion people - that's really half a billion - more than all the wars combined. The year I joined the WHO, nearly 200,000 children in India contracted smallpox. One third died the most horrible death imaginable.

Three years later, I was privileged to see the last case of Variola Major in nature. I watched as Rahima Banu, a young Bangladeshi girl on Bhola Island, coughed and breathed out the final virus in a chain of transmission that stretched as far back as the biblical plagues. A disease which killed Pharoah Ramses died itself when the Variola virus fell to the Bangladeshi soil in October 1977.

This, too, was one of public health's finest hours.

When I joined the WHO, I had never seen a case of smallpox. The person who took me to see my first case, a Muslim boy in Matura in Uttar Pradesh, was Bill Foege, who had designed the strategy for global smallpox eradication.

Foege, who would later become head of the Centers of Disease Control and the Carter Center and was instrumental in the public health emphasis of the Gates Foundation, is not only a public health doctor, he is a historian and philosopher.

When we left that village after seeing at least a dozen cases of smallpox, I was stunned. I wanted to act like a clinician, to treat these children, to put them in intensive care, to see their fever curves abate and get them well. Of course, there were no hospitals of the kind I imagined; intensive care units did not exist. There was no treatment, only prevention. Clinical medicine was useless. Only public health could stop this ancient scourge.

Bill told me that from that day on I would have to transition from taking satisfaction from treating an individual to taking responsibility for the health of all people. Instead of intently watching a temperature chart showing a child recovering from a fever, I had to transition to looking at population based graphs on paper - epidemic curves showing that a community of people had conquered the epidemic.

This too is part of public health.

When I joined the WHO, and Bill Foege showed me that village filled with children dying of smallpox, it was like looking into Dante's Inferno or a painting of Hieronymus Bosch. I never knew a disease could be so cruel and death so painful. Parents had to stand by helplessly watching their children suffer and die from it.

Over the next few years, 150,000 health workers visited every house in India searching for hidden cases of smallpox. We made more than one billion house calls. We had some very dark days, with huge setbacks from floods, transportation strikes, and the horrific toll of the disease itself. In the city of Tatanagar, I saw hundreds of dead bodies in the streets or the railway station, while there were reports that the river had stopped running, blocked by the dead bodies of children. I have probably seen over 5,000 cases of smallpox. Some of these children died in my arms or were already dead when their mothers handed them to me in a desperate hope that a UN doctor could cure them.

Yet we won. In 1980, smallpox was declared eradicated from the world. The first and so far, only disease ever eliminated by a public health campaign. I expect and pray that polio is to follow very soon.

The experience of being a part of this kind of achievement also changed the smallpox warriors, as we called ourselves. Like those of us who met Dr. Martin Luther King, those of us who successfully battled smallpox would never be same again. We were on fire with optimism and spread the optimism virus to dozens of programs and institutions throughout the world. If smallpox could be eradicated, what about polio, malaria and later, HIV/Aids? We infected the CDC, the National Institutes of Health, other UN agencies, many large foundations, and schools of public health. Some of our veterans went on to lead programs to combat HIV/Aids, malaria, blindness and polio, to name a few.

This, too, is part of your heritage in public health.

After we eradicated smallpox, while I was on the University of Michigan faculty, many of the smallpox veterans stayed in touch. We were still optimistic, we wanted to do more. With my friends, some of whom are here in the audience today, I started the Seva Foundation in Ann Arbor to try to conquer needless blindness as we had smallpox. Many of us were U of M grads. Over the past 30 years Seva has grown, given away over $150 million and started hospitals and public health eye care projects in a dozen countries around the world.

To date, Seva's projects throughout the world have given back sight to more than two million blind people. This is proof of what a small group of public health fanatics meeting in Ann Arbor can do.

My life has since taken me away even farther from the front lines of public health to the supporting position I hold today - directing philanthropy at Google.org. Trying to find the best projects and people to support so it is their turn now on the

front lines, their turn to make history fighting the good fight for public health concerns stemming from epidemics, poverty and global warming.

This, too, though is part of pubic health.

Today begins your turn to fight the good fights. And you will have many to pick from. Here are some that we are spending time on at Google.org.

- Global warming will bring more climate-related public health catastrophes, hurricanes and drought and the specter of famine. We need to find a way to make electricity from renewables at prices cheaper than coal, and to use that green electricity instead of oil or bio fuels for our cars.

- Global warming reduces arable land for agriculture. We are already seeing some of the most serious food shortages in 30 years and the *Economist* has called this the food crisis of '08, the silent tsunami of deaths from hunger. We need early warning systems for drought and famine. And for the new diseases that arise from climate change. The last 30 years have seen 30 new communicable diseases - most of them hopping from animals to humans, such as bird flu, SARS, west nile, ebola, monkey pox, hanta virus, and of course HIV/Aids. Many of these could become pandemic.

- We are now 6.6 billion people. As the world's population and consumption increases, many resources are running out, threatening the health and lives of billions of people. We need to worry about peak water more than peak oil. In the 60's Paul Ehrlich's population bomb projected that by today, we would be 10 billion people. We have only 2/3 that number but we eat and leave a carbon footprint like 10 billion.

- Globalization has created many winners and may more losers. We need the engine of economic growth of the market place, but we have lost sight of the safety net, the shared sense that we are "all in this together". Nobel Laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz says that there has never been such a wide disparity between the rich and the poor in all of history. Former President Bill Clinton recently remarked that "the increasing disparity between the wealth of the few on top compared to the billions at the bottom of the pyramid is unequal, unfair, unprecedented, unstable, unsustainable. And it makes the entire world insecure."

In my beloved India, they are justly proud that there are more billionaires in Bombay than in New York; but a scant few miles away from the billionaires are 300 million living on 75 cents a day. We must find a way to improve public services to those who live on less than $2 per day, and equally important, help find ways to invest in enterprises that bring them jobs.

All of these issues, far away in time or miles, in one way or another are part of my expanded view of public health

Reasons for optimism

But even against this backdrop of pessimistic stories, there is so much reason for optimism about your future.

This past weekend in Chrysler Arena, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, spoke here in Ann Arbor. The Dalai Lama was asked how he maintains hope when all the news is so disastrous. His answer rarely varies. He says, "humans are getting better."

Now what in the world does he mean by *this*? How can he say humans are getting better in our era of Abu Ghraib, Darfur, the tsunami of starvation, and even what's happening in the Dalai Lama's own ancient home of Tibet?

Well, the fact is that by any objective measure, and with a long enough view, things are getting better. Human violence throughout the world has dramatically declined. We have less than half the number of wars of five decades ago. Slavery, once widespread, which still exists, is broadly condemned. Torture, for so long practiced in secret, has been brought out into the open and most of the world has recoiled from it. Most industrialized countries have even abolished capital punishment. We have an ethic of "human rights" – something that wasn't at all on the radar screen for relatively recent generations. And just in the past few years, we have a very rapidly evolving consciousness on the right as well as on the left that we must be stewards of our planet with a post modern belief that nature is not something to conquer but to defend.

In the Sixties, the movements for social justice transformed America. Today we're in the midst of another, broader moment of magic and power. Unprecedented in its size and scope, reflected in the huge and growing global movement dedicated to improve global health, relieve poverty, preserve the natural environment and make the world a more just place. My friend Paul Hawken has just written a new book about this silent movement called "Blessed Unrest: How The Largest Movement In The World Came Into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming." This new and expanding community has quietly but steadily created more than 1 million environmentally conscious NGOs in more than 100 countries.

Thirty years ago when I lived on the subcontinent, 50 percent of children died before their fifth birthday in Bangladesh and Nepal. Today it is half that many. Similar progress is being made throughout Asia and Africa even in economics: last year's list of best performing stock exchanges includes names like Peru and Indonesia and countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. And whatever we may think of human rights issues, China has created a modern-day miracle, lifting 300 million people out of poverty and thrusting them into the middle class.

In large part because of the Gates Foundation, children's deaths from vaccine preventable diseases are plummeting. Thirty years ago, less than one in five kids was vaccinated against childhood diseases in developing countries, today it is the reverse - nearly four in five children in most developing countries have gotten all their childhood immunizations.

As you go forth today to start you will find many reasons to be optimistic.

As the Dali Lama said, "We are improving."

But you need to speed it up. That is your destiny.

Young people can and are making things better, faster. I am constantly encouraged by a related trend: the sea-change I see in philanthropy. Charity used to be mainly the province of the very old and often the very guilty, who waited until they died so a foundation named after them could fund the university or opera house. Now we see 30 and 40 somethings with fortunes to dispose of talking about "strategic" giving and thinking seriously and imaginatively about huge problems that include sustainable jobs in Africa, rainforests in Indonesia, green-collar jobs in Oakland, California.

These changes in philanthropy are also creating a new and much broader context for public health careers. If I were giving this talk a decade ago, I might have warned you of how little funding there was for a lifetime career serving the poorest and sickest in the world. Yet that is simply not true any longer, thanks to the expanded awareness of new philanthropists such as Bill Gates, Herb and Marion Sandler, eBay's Jeff Skoll and Pierre Omidyar, Salesforce.com's Marc Benioff, and two people I admire greatly, Google's Sergey Brin and Larry Page. These are great times for strategic philanthropy and for the opportunities they will give birth to.

So my hope for you today is to go forward with confidence. Yes, things are not as good as they should be and they are not as good as they will be, but thank God they are not as bad as they once were.

Here is the best news for you, class of 2008. This is your time.

The largest movement for good in human history is taking place today and they have saved a place for you.

Your timing is perfect.

You are part of a global conspiracy of the good and great and you inherit a magnificent tradition.

You will find innovative ways to finance an improved and more efficient health care system, re-establishing a decent safety net for the poorest in society.

You will use new technologies, whether web 2.0 or 10.0, mobile phones and social networks and new communication technologies to revolutionize health education.

And you will figure out how to conquer diseases that fall disproportionately on the world's most deprived members - diseases such as polio, malaria, HIV/Aids, and tuberculosis.

In the Sixties, when my generation was shell shocked by the assassinations of Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy and the daily death toll from the war in Vietnam depressed us beyond imagination, a San Francisco radio reporter, Skoop Nisker, ended every broadcast by urging his listeners, "if you don't like today's news, go out and make some of your own."

CLASS OF 2008: THIS IS IT. TODAY BEGINS YOUR DAY, YOUR DREAM. FROM TODAY ON, IT IS YOUR NEWSCAST.

CLASS OF 2008: TODAY YOU JOIN A NOBLE PROFESSION AND GET A LICENSE TO CHANGE THE WORLD.

CLASS OF 2008: GO OUT AND MAKE YOUR OWN NEWS.

CLASS OF 2008: GO OUT AND CHANGE THE WORLD.

CLASS OF 2008: GO OUT AND MAKE SOME NOISE!

CLASS OF 2008: GO BLUE!

Thank you so much.