



# Crossings Reflection #7<sup>1</sup>

## KSPT Graduation Commencement Address

— Sam Kegerreis MS, PT, AT,C (L)  
December 14, 2002

Honored guests, distinguished faculty, devoted friends and family, and, **most significantly**, the Krannert School of Physical Therapy graduating class of 2002:

Before beginning, I have to take just a moment to express my gratitude to this class for the opportunity to address you one last time. When Nichole approached me about speaking at this commencement almost a year ago, I have to admit that my heart was warmed to think that a group I'd spent two and a half years with would choose to invest their last moments as student PTs listening to something I might have to say. What could I possibly share that would justify your faith?

I need to confess, though, that this isn't the first time I've experienced this dilemma. On December 12, 1982, twenty years and two days ago, I was asked to give the commencement address to the *first* graduating class of the Krannert School of Physical Therapy.

Beth Domholdt and Clyde Killian were junior members of our faculty at that time. My text was typed by a beautiful young secretary named Sally Hyde on a technological marvel called an electric typewriter, which was really pretty amazing. It even came with a delete button in the form of a plastic bottle (more commonly referred to as "whiteout").

Beth now serves admirably as our dean and grace has returned Clyde to us after much too long an absence. Sally Hyde, who retired this fall after a career as a human blessing to our faculty and students, has honored us with her presence—and by the way, she's still just as beautiful as ever.

Just recently I've taken the opportunity to review that original talk and was pleased to realize that while much of the world has turned upside down in the last 20 years, some things truly are timeless.

I hope you listened closely to Clint's reading. The same passage that was read by Clint today was also read 20 years ago, and it's perhaps even more appropriate than ever before.

I'm embarrassed to say that it's taken almost 50 years for me to just begin to have the least bit of understanding as to the significance and power of love. This is what I'd like to share with you today, in our last class together.

I'm aware that when I speak of something as abstract as love that there will be those who will be restrained from rolling their eyes and checking their watches only by good old Midwestern common courtesy. The economy is a bust, there are terrorists at our door, corporate leaders appear to be out for themselves, and our warm and fuzzy speaker is talking about flower power. But, you see, that's the point . . . and the thing that is so hard for us to grasp. When we perceive love as warm and fuzzy or as anything remotely less than the hardest thing we'll ever try to do, we just don't get it!

It's critical that you comprehend what I'm talking about when I refer to love. Please understand that "You make me feel so good / I think I'll have that inscribed as a tattoo / *Pro bono* looks good on my vitae / Oh, well, it's tax deductible" love is *not* what I'm talking about!

Love is a decision. Love is behavior. Love is not a feeling, and it's got nothing to do with personal gain.

What Clint read in I Corinthians is "Caring for an ailing parent or child when your energy is exhausted / confronting a resistant patient (or your employer) when necessary / planting a tree where you'll never see the shade / unconditional, collective-soul / how can I help even when it feels uncomfortable" love. Love is a tough gig, but as we watch news reports and read the daily headlines, it's obvious that the stakes are just too high to continue with business as usual.

The days of using whiteout to solve our problems are rapidly dwindling. History has taught us that we-win/you-lose strategies even-

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tually become circular firing squads with devastating consequences. We *have* to do better.

Mahatma Gandhi said that the following things have the potential to destroy us: “politics without principle; pleasure without conscience; wealth without work; knowledge without character; business without morality; science without humanity; and worship without sacrifice.”

I think he was describing a world without love.

*“Love bares all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”*

As young parents, Karen and I used to grow frustrated by the squabbling of our three sons. I have to admit to once in a while, at the end of a long day, grabbing the three of them by the scruff of the neck and tossing them into a room with the instructions, “And don’t come out until you love one another.”

It sounds simple, doesn’t it? Well, one day it occurred to me: Could it be that God is sitting somewhere in an armchair, grieving over the inability of his children to obey the single commandment that, if followed, could turn a hell into a heaven? Will mankind as we know it ever make it out of the room?

*“When I was a child I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child. When I became a man I did away with childish things.”* With respect to that analogy, mankind is way past growing up. I don’t think love is warm and fuzzy, I think it’s the only hope of humanity in an increasingly complex world.

Without real love, all our knowledge, all our technology, all our blustering and moral posturing, is but a gong.

The problem is that we have the capacity to love, but no one can make us love.

Before dismissing you for the last time with the challenge to love, it seems only fair that I address some of the complications and ramifications of that instruction.

There are many reasons that mankind fails to love—greed and idolatry among them—but, you know, I seldom worry about those temptations with our students. One of the blessings of teaching at the University of Indianapolis is that our students as a whole are invariably more altruistic than I am. My students, patients, and family have been and continue to be my greatest teachers, and I’m grateful for your influence on my life.

What I’d like to warn you about, though, before you leave, is a more subtle and insidious danger: the phenomena of distraction.

In the way of a metaphor my mind drifts back to a time many years ago when playing the board game Monopoly. Do any of you remember Monopoly? Well, the goal of the game is just as it is entitled: to accumulate sufficient paper wealth to eventually dominate the opposition. Kind of a cardboard version of today’s socially redeeming “Survivor Series.”

My recollection involves being fortunate enough to have purchased Indiana and Illinois avenues early in the game and being in a position to dominate the Midwestern corner of the board by putting houses and even hotels on my properties! The only thing I needed was Kentucky Avenue. The problem was that all my opponents knew that also, and one of them already owned it.

Well, you know how the game goes. Everyone makes deals and attempts to improve their position without becoming vulnerable—behavior said to be common in board rooms and cocktail parties, and some committee meetings.

Skillful players think several deals ahead, much like in chess. Joe, who owns Kentucky Avenue, won’t trade with me but needs Atlantic Avenue, which might be acquired by Bob for Reading Railroad, which is presently owned by Jean, who really needs Boardwalk, which I own and under the right circumstances might part with. Now, if I can just manipulate this scenario by confusing these people into a multitrader deal . . . well, you get the idea.

You might also be able to guess what happened. After about an hour of deft trading, I managed to mortgaged my fortune for Kentucky Avenue, only to realize five minutes later that somewhere during the transaction I had traded both Indiana and Illinois! Crap! I simply got distracted and lost sight of what it was that was so important to me. Have you ever done that?

Well, I still do, and I think that good, well-intended people get distracted all the time.

Scott Peck, in his book *The People of the Lie* coined a term I find interesting: “fragmentation of consciousness.” I’d contend that fragmentation of consciousness is alive and thriving among the well-intended people who make our laws, care for our sick, educate our children, and sign our paychecks.

In many ways “fragmentation of consciousness” is an elaboration of Martin Buber’s concept that in today’s society, even the best-intended of us are under great pressure to treat each other as objects, goals to be met, outcomes to be achieved.

The secular distractions that fragment our consciousness aren’t board pieces, but rather the illusion of power and productivity too often rooted in intellectual arrogance, rigid ideology, and a win-lose mentality that states that we’re right and everyone else is wrong and the ends justify the means.

I shared with you during our first week together that you’ve entered the profession of physical therapy because you wanted to help people, and I also warned you that day not to let your education diminish your compassion. You’ve done a good job of that. Now, as you leave here to begin your first real paying jobs, to raise your families, conduct the business of health care, and contribute to the world, I need to remind you more specifically: you are going to be exposed to pervasive, persistent, and powerful distractions—distractions that have the potential to seriously threaten your capacity to love, the very purpose of your existence.

“So, Sam, you want us to love everybody and change the world. Can you be a little more specific, while remembering that my diploma is somewhere over there on a table growing mold? So what? Cut to the chase . . . What’s on the test? The horses are smelling the barn!” Well, here you go.

**One:** If in your travels you are fortunate enough to find a mate, love them very well. And by this I’m referring to the old-fashioned idea about long-term, committed, monogamous relationships that command the dedication of more than a trial treatment.

There comes a time in every relationship when you’ll awaken beside a snoring, foul-breathed, stressed-out partner who at that moment just doesn’t make your heart flutter like it once did. When that happens you’ll have a simple choice to make. Will I or will I not love this person? It’s a choice, and there won’t be anything warm and fuzzy about it. Will I be patient? Will I be kind? Will I be understanding? It won’t be easy, and some days it will be very, very difficult. The decision to love under these circumstances will enable you to do the work that can save you endless heartbreak.

It’s a wonderful thing to be able to rest your head each evening knowing your partner understands the real meaning of love and is dedicated to making your life richer, even if you haven’t been particularly loveable today. Compare that peace to the restless sleep that occurs when a couple fails to invest the time and energy to come to a consensus on child rearing, the budget, the color of the new sofa, or a thousand other distractions that have destroyed relationships. When two people recognize the distinction between infatuation and love, real love, and commit themselves to the latter, this is the precious gift they give to one another. But it takes time.

**Two:** Love the lonely—and by lonely I refer to those who are troubled, estranged, widowed, divorced, abandoned, disadvantaged, physically or mentally ill, or simply different. We all assume these roles at one time or another, and often more so than we allow ourselves to admit. Take the time to look closely into the eyes of your patients, your co-workers, your friends, and your family, and you’ll soon recognize that loneliness is the predominant epidemic of our modern world.

It seems so ironic in the present information age that our daily headlines cry out for people to take the time and effort to communicate with one another. We’ve bookmarked Web sites to stay in touch with our stock holdings, our fantasy football teams, and our professional organizations, but too often in doing so our farsightedness is at the expense of the people standing in front of us.

Is there anyone here who hasn’t been irritated by the discourteous behavior of someone on a cell phone who is oblivious to everyone around them? Now there’s a metaphor to describe the relationship of distraction and love if I’ve ever heard one—and what’s even worse is the fact that we’re teaching these values to our children.

Technology has a tremendous upside, but the limitation we often fail to realize is that instant information, even of the best

kind, is not knowledge. And knowledge is not communication. And communication is not understanding. And understanding, which takes time, is critical to love.

Roderick Haig-Brown said, “Understanding, whether instinctive and immediate or developing naturally through time or grown of conscious effort, is a necessary preliminary to love. Understanding of another human being can never be complete, but as it grows toward completeness, it becomes love almost inevitably.”

Long before I ever heard of the terms biopsychosocial or patient-centered approach, I learned that if I took the time to attempt to understand my patients I would be a more effective therapist. Not because of a technical skill I had to offer them, but rather by attempting to understand them I empowered them to understand themselves and the healing they needed to accomplish.

In recent years I’ve attempted to apply this concept in the rest of my life, but I have to admit that I all too often fail miserably. I am repeatedly distracted by the allure of productivity and the recognition and societal approval it represents.

My inherent mode of operation dwells on the most efficient way to get the job done, but Steven Covey’s words haunt me when he states, “While you can be efficient with things, you can’t be efficient effectively with people.”

Do you remember the trouble many of you experienced the first time you had to work together on group tests? I shared some time ago with Francina that you were not my all-time favorite class during your first semester. But sometime during your second semester, most of you let go of your individual insecurities and found a way to work together: a symptom of love. It was inspirational for me to witness that behavior.

The students, again, teaching the teacher. I’m sure that process was time consuming, but in my mind the results it created were priceless.

**Three (and this is the tricky one):** Love yourselves.

Too often in secular society, when we speak of loving ourselves we do so with a trickle-down mentality that suggests that after I’ve got mine I’ll share what’s left over with you. This mindset is most evidenced as it relates to money, but believe it or not, material wealth is only a secondary issue.

In order to love yourself, the currency I’d like you to be most attentive to, the currency most vulnerable to distractions, the currency most vital to your ability to love, is the currency that we’ve already alluded to: your time—the currency of your life.

How often in recent months have you felt disappointed because you didn’t have the time to listen closely to a troubled friend, to reach out to someone in need, to invest in personal spiritual rejuvenation, or simply to take a deep, satisfying breath? Well, do you remember that schedule that you’ve been devoted to for the last two and a half years? The next event on it is the rest of your life—and for the first time in a long time, you’ll be the one filling out that schedule.

In doing so you're going to face lots of distractions. Many of you drive cars that are breaking down, your sofas have beer stains on them, and some of your clothes still smell like cadavers.

On the other hand, you're about to graduate from one of the finest physical therapy schools in the country. Many of you are soon going to have a regular paycheck coming in that will represent more money than you've ever earned in your lives, and the world will be at your door with the sweetest deals you've ever seen.

Well, purchase a car that runs, buy a clean sofa, and throw out your smelly clothes, but don't forget that there's a big difference between making a living and having a life—and how you invest your time in doing so will be critical.

Fame and riches will come to many of you and those are fine things, but be vigilantly conscious of their cost. If you find yourself continually distracted in pursuit of that perfect job, that notoriety that you deserve, that stuff you crave, you'll awake one morning with a terrible emptiness in your stomach and you'll realize you've lost sight of what was really important to you.

You need *time* to love. Manage it well. Robert Fulghum, the author of *Everything I Ever Needed To Know I Learned In Kindergar-*

*ten*, simply stated, "Whenever you have a choice, always choose time over money."

Oh, and by the way: I *do* expect you to change the world. Mother Teresa said, "We can do no great things—only small things with great love." Every selfless loving thing you do, not out of emotion, but rather via conscious decision, *does* make a difference. Let me assure you when your maker finally calls you home, your level of significance won't be calibrated statistically.

*"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails."*

So this is it: two and a half years! Leave here today and become societal leaders. Publish research that will solidify your profession. Become financially independent and contribute to charitable causes. Treat your patients, raise your babies, and be a blessing to those you meet.

Whatever you do—*whatever you do*—will be more than enough, as long as you remember that whatever you do will be a vehicle for love. And all these things will eventually pass away, but your love—your love will last forever.

God bless you.



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