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Joel A. Dvoskin PhD: Knowledge is obligation

“Confessions of an incrementalist”

John W. Thompson, Jr. MD

The first distinguished lecture of the 2001 Boston AAPL Meeting was delivered at noon on Thursday by one of AAPL's most prolific contributors. Joel Dvoskin is well known to most psychiatrists and psychologists for his outstanding contributions to the care and treatment of the seriously mentally ill and his endless commitment to education in the fields of forensic psychology and psychiatry. Dr. Dvoskin has worked in every forensic setting imaginable, from maximum security prisons to maximum security hospitals. He speaks with knowledge that few individuals possess - the educational knowledge that comes from the literature and the knowledge of true understanding for the plight of the mentally ill in secure settings. While he rose in the ranks of treatment professionals to one of the most complex and prestigious positions, Commissioner of the New York Mental Health System, he never lost sight of the person. The person incarcerated in jail or housed in the hospital with “mental illness” is frequently a misunderstood person that society wants to put away and brand with labels.

Dr. Dvoskin described his travels across the country, where he saw horrifying conditions, in which psychiatrists and psychologists work tirelessly to provide decent care to the mentally ill. He made us proud of our care for our patients. He helped us to see the importance of our work.

He challenged the notion by some ethicists who say we should not participate in such systems where our care is thwarted with inadequate facilities and resources. He challenged us not to walk away in protest. He encouraged us to stay the course and do our best no matter what the odds: “...[W]hen I meet the people who have stayed, I do not find them less ethical or less moral for it. To the contrary, many of these psychologists, nurses, psychiatrists, social workers, correctional officers, and psychiatric technicians have become heroes to me. To maintain one's standards of decency and professionalism in the face of an apparently uncaring political system takes courage, tenacity and goodness of heart.”

Dr. Dvoskin elaborated on how he had learned to deal with

the dilemma of providing care to the most difficult of populations. He abandoned the idea of perfectionism, which is ultimately frustrating to the individual. He focused instead on incremental achievements - the concept by which we leave everything just a little better than we find it. If we all participate in caring for the mentally ill in these settings and do just a little to improve them, then great things can happen.

He stated the case perfectly when he said, “To me the moral thing, the ethical thing, is not to cut and run. It is to maintain one's dignity and professionalism in the face of bad circumstances. It is to understand the difference between reasonable flexibility and selling out. It is speaking with honor and humility (even in court) about how it ought to be, and resisting the understandable temptation to sink into self righteous and angry denunciations. It is protecting your own hope against all assaults, because hope is the most precious gift you share with you clients.”

Dr. Dvoskin went on praise all of us who work in difficult settings. He made us feel proud of our work in correctional

and secure forensic settings. He called us heroes. He validated what we already knew in our hearts. It is worthwhile and honorable to do what we do.

And for this writer, he

changed my mind, for I was thinking of quitting and now I'm not. Thank you Joel!

Editor's Note: I can't help but admit to having the exact same

experience as in Dr. Thompson's concluding self-revelation, and to echo his appreciation to Dr. Dvoskin.