

My Life's Work: Giving Life a Second Chance

Howard M. Nathan

Commencement Speech for the Graduating Classes of 2020 and 2021, May 15, 2021

A 1975 graduate of Juniata College, Howard M. Nathan served as President and CEO of the Gift of Life Donor Program from January 1984 to January 2022, eight months after this speech, when he retired as the longest-serving chief executive of any US organ procurement organization. He is now Executive Director of the Gift of Life Transplant Foundation.

Whenever I return to Juniata College, memories surge from when I first set foot on campus nearly fifty years ago and stormed the Cloister dormitory Arch as a freshman. I think back to when I was a young student; I was that kid who lived in Cloister, played club ice hockey, and sang in the Juniata Concert Choir. Don't worry, I am not going to sing! I reflect on the dreams I thought would define me. I think of what I would like to tell this younger version of myself about what he could actually do in life. I reflect on all I did not know.

Today is an especially moving day for everyone here. Today I look out at all of you and think of these post-pandemic selves we are stepping into. We are here, in person, on one of the most important days of your lives. In person, after months of Zoom and Facetime.

I don't know about you, but I watched my fair share of television while sheltering in place. My wife, Liz, and I binge-watched *Schitt's Creek*, *Ozark*, and even, I will admit, *Tiger King* with the rest of the world. During the holidays, I also watched, again, one of my old favorites: a 1947 film starring Jimmy Stewart called *It's a Wonderful Life*.

The year 1947. Yes, that IS a really long time ago. Even I was not born yet. But bear with me for a moment because "It's a Wonderful Life" is a genuine classic, full of lessons about seeing one's own worth no matter how much hardship temporarily descends. There is darkness, like the darkness we have all just been through, and then, at last, there is light, full of second chances.

I am one of those people who finds meaning when the down-on-his-luck Stewart character, George Bailey, realizes how significant his life has been. George faced so many problems that he did not want to live any more. With the assistance of a second-class angel working to earn his wings, George sees the worth and the impact he has had on others. Indeed, had Stewart's character not lived at all, the world would have been a poorer place. Less goodness. Less community.

Can one single person really make such a difference? Do we all, finally, matter? Do we all have the power to make this world a better place?

I have lived my life saying Yes, even when faced with some resounding Nos.



Figure 1. Two photos from the Juniata College Commencement on May 15, 2021: On the left, Howard M. Nathan poses with liver transplant recipient and fellow commencement speaker Onyi Kenine. The right photo depicts Nathan delivering the commencement address. Photo credits: Gift of Life Donor Program.

The life that I live now was certainly not preordained when I was a Juniata student back in the early seventies. I arrived here as a small-town kid from Johnstown. My father had died suddenly from a heart attack when I was nine years old, my grandmother a few years later, and my beloved dog, Poochie, shortly after that. I grew up in an 800-square-foot house that my mother worked minimum-wage jobs in retail clothing to maintain for her three children. My mother's values became my own: that every choice you are faced with must be met with the determination "to do the right thing."

"Do the right thing."

Juniata College combined all that felt familiar about my small-town values and community with something brand new—a chance to design my own course of studies through the new program of emphasis (POE) curriculum that began in 1971. Two of my first classes were Modes and Methods of Inquiry and Human Existence. I am *still* trying to figure that all out. I ended up majoring in biology with a minor in sociology. Juniata allowed me to reap the benefits of a solid liberal arts education, enhancing my ability to think, communicate, and solve problems. I could also pursue my dream, which was to grow up to be—as the son of a Jewish mom, what else? —a doctor.

However, I did not become a doctor, as it turns out. My life took me down another path. After graduation, while on a medical school's wait list, I returned to Johnstown and to my job bagging groceries

at night. During the day, I worked at a hospital lab. That lasted until my youthful honesty and colorful language got me fired. Yup, from my first real job. I was upset that because of lab errors I was going to have to draw blood for a fourth time from a crying, two-day-old baby. In retrospect, there were probably better ways I could have handled it.

Fortunately, thanks to a senior-year class here at Juniata, I knew how to use an electron microscope and got a job as a research specialist at the Wistar Institute in Philadelphia. After two years, I left to go to graduate school in Pittsburgh to study public health, thinking that it might help with medical school. Frankly, that did not work out either. What was it going to take, I wondered, to build a life that really mattered? What could this underdog from Johnstown achieve?

Looking back, it is clear to me that I found my footing—discovered my possibilities as a person—by recalling the bedrock principles I had learned both from my mom and here at Juniata College:

First: Respect, compassion, and fairness—because good work begins with goodness. Always “do the right thing.”

Second: Hard work, perseverance, and resilience. We have certainly seen the importance of that this past year. Let’s face it: Sometimes the things we hope for in life do not always turn out the way we want. That is why you need to fight for what you believe in.

Third: Appreciation for the others in our lives—because we are not living our lives alone and what we do matters.

Today, I have the good fortune of leading the Gift of Life Donor Program, the largest organ donor and transplant network in the country (see Figure 2, left side, below). We have proudly coordinated more life-saving organs for transplant than anywhere in the nation.

My transition from a young man around your age who had never even ridden a subway, let alone boarded an airplane, to someone whose work—and passion—have taken him to more than thirty countries began in 1978. I happened to see an ad for this unusual-sounding job: organ transplant coordinator (see Figure 2, right side, below). I applied. I interviewed. I even offered to work the first three months for free when I saw that the transplant surgeons with whom I had interviewed were not really sure about me. I persevered—fought—for this job that combined my passion for medicine and people. I knew it was the job I wanted and worked hard to get to a Yes. And I got the job.

Suddenly my life was a 24/7 stream of phone calls, rapid response, intense conversations, magnificent improvisation, and urgent coordination designed to recover organs and tissues from those whose lives had tragically ended so that others might miraculously live. A life, in other words, of second chances.

It was not easy. I was twenty-four years old and facing families who had just suffered the most shocking, devastating loss of their lives. How could I console them? What could I say? I learned from



Figure 2. On the left, Howard M. Nathan is pictured in front of the Gift of Life Donor Program’s headquarters in Philadelphia. Photo credit: Cornerstone Advisors Asset Management and Gift of Life Donor Program. On the right, a young Nathan is shown beginning his career in organ donation as a transplant coordinator; photo from 1980. Photo credit: Gift of Life Donor Program.

them the true meaning of compassion and courage: people who said yes to saving a stranger’s life moments after losing someone who had meant everything to them.

Then I had to find a match for the organs, without the many systems and advanced technologies we have today. The clock was always ticking. We did—and still do—whatever is necessary to save a life. I found myself often speeding down the Pennsylvania Turnpike in the middle of the night or, instead, boarding for my first-ever plane or helicopter ride to get a surgeon an organ, an organ that would save somebody’s life. Somebody’s child. Somebody’s parent. Somebody’s husband or wife.

I was on the cutting edge of medicine in the early days of transplantation, one the biggest medical breakthroughs of our time. Frankly, this felt more exciting to me than medical school. I could impact change NOW. This was real. This was my calling. And I never looked back.

The passion and urgency have not let up over the past forty-three years. Grief and loss have always been near. But so, too, has been the true joy of knowing that lives that might have been cut too short were not and that there are many “wonderful lives” being lived because of this compassionate act, the gift of life.

Eleven years after I entered the field, my own sister went on the transplant wait list for a liver. She waited two-and-a-half years, and by the time she got her transplant, she weighed less than

eighty-five pounds. When she received the gift of a liver, her life and our families' lives were transformed in many ways.

It is personal; it always is personal. It is why every day I wake up filled with that third bedrock principle—deepest appreciation—appreciation for people like Cynthia London, who gave a selfless gift on behalf of her son Siphon, a twenty-two-year-old Kutztown University student destined to become a teacher, a young man whose life was cut short by a gunshot. Cynthia's decision did not just save the lives of six people. More than twenty years later, Cynthia continues to save lives through her ongoing organ donor advocacy work in the community and serves on the Gift of Life board.

Appreciation for people like Onyi, whom you see in Figure 1. I do not have to tell you how charming she is, how intelligent, how generous. She wants to be a doctor, a pediatrician. She will—I am profoundly certain of this—make a meaningful, lasting difference in the lives of others. None of this would have been possible without the kindness and compassion of a stranger who gave her a second chance at life.

Appreciation for my tremendous team at Gift of Life, which has grown from three people when I started to, now, 275 world-class, compassionate experts who work 24/7 to save lives.

And, of course, appreciation for all of those who opened doors for me when others would not: Like the five transplant surgeons that interviewed me for that unique “transplant coordinator” position and finally saw in me things I did not yet see in myself. Like Hilda Nathan, no relation to me, the very first person I met at Juniata College. Hilda was rightly famous for her compassion, for removing barriers standing in the way of students' dreams. If you have passed by Nathan Hall on campus, you have passed by part of her legacy. But to me her legacy is deeply personal, for she helped me to secure a \$1,000 scholarship and afford the \$3,300 tuition. Yes, I said \$3,300. It costs *just a little bit more* to storm the Arch these days. Hilda Nathan helped make a Juniata College education possible for me. She helped to put me on the path toward so many “wonderful lives,” a path that has led me toward you, right now, celebrating this wonderful moment in your wonderful lives.

Many of the people who have defined and given meaning to your life are here with you today. The friends that you have made. The professors who inspired you. The families who made it possible for you to arrive at this proud moment. Think of your own hard work and the hard work of others on your behalf. Think of the respect that you have been given and the respect that you have given back. Think of all that you appreciate and all who appreciate you. Celebrate who you have become. Celebrate what you will carry forward. Celebrate the road ahead. Confront your “Nos” and be bold with your actions.

Celebrate your own infinite possibilities. Congratulations to each one of you. And as you leave here today, ask yourself: How many lives will you change? How many genuinely wonderful lives?