

The Importance of Oaths

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Thank you and good morning everyone!

It is truly an honor to be here today and I would like to express my appreciation to Jeff Harsh and the Event Committee of the New Birth of Freedom Council for inviting me. It's a great opportunity to support such an important organization and to reinforce its relevance at a time when there are so many challenges to growing up in the world around us.

My experience with scouting developed when Judy and I moved here from Virginia as a young family and our son, Chris, rose through the scouting ranks over the years eventually to obtain the rank of Eagle Scout – of course, in no small part due to the persistence of his mother and with the help and guidance of some in this room.

As a chaperoning parent I still remember all too vividly overnight camping trips that were much wetter or much colder than advertised. Most importantly, as the boys from those years in Troop 201 have grown up and are now adults, Judy and I have seen first-hand the lasting impact that scouting has had on all of them.

As you heard from the introduction, I am Chair of the Department of Surgery at the Medical Center and Chief Operating Officer for our Medical Group. As a pediatric surgeon I have the sacred privilege of having parents place their complete trust in me over the care of their child at a time when they have no other recourse to do anything else but place their trust in me, and I will come back to the importance of this statement in a minute.

As I was thinking about what I would say at this program this morning, I had the opportunity of reviewing several outstanding presentations by recent guest speakers. You have had notable CEOs and presidents of leading companies and businesses in the area speak eloquently about the importance of scouting and

leadership and the importance of life-long moral and ethical values instilled by the scouting experience. And just last year my boss, Dr Craig Hillemeier, spoke about how he applied the values of scouting in leading our hospital organization.

Professing additional insights over and above such outstanding presentations was proving to be a challenge.

So I began to think about some of the parallel characteristics between scouting and medicine. How scouting is really a metaphor for preparing young men for life through goal setting, education, acquiring new skills, and demonstrating competency – exactly what goes on in preparing medical students and residents for careers in medicine.

But what I kept coming back to was the importance that both scouting and medicine attach to a common action, an act that serves as the moral, ethical, and spiritual reminder for both scouting and medicine. It is something that every Scout in this room has performed, and it is something that every physician recites upon graduating medical school. I am talking about the Scout Oath and the Hippocratic Oath.

So I began thinking about oaths – why do we say them and what do they mean - thus, I thought I would focus my comments on the importance and the **power** of an oath.

Now, we all know about oaths in our lives. There is an oath when someone goes to court, there is an oath – or a vow – when someone gets married; there is an oath when someone enlists to serve our country, or assumes an elected position. So what is an oath and why are the Scout and Hippocratic oaths so important?

The word, Oath, itself is of Greek and Gothic origin that evolved through our Anglo-Saxon lexicon.

An oath is a promise. It is spoken out loud in front of other people who can see and hear what is done and said. There are witnesses to an oath.

Historically, the swearer of an oath performed three things. First, the swearer made a declaration. It might be a statement about the past or present in which case the oath is assertory; or it may be about an undertaking in the future in which case the oath is promissory. Second, the swearer traditionally specifies a divine or superhuman power as witness to the declaration. The ancient Greeks were very good at this as they were always invoking Zeus or Apollo or so many others for support. And third, the swearer would call down a conditional curse on him/herself to take effect if the promise was violated.

Oaths have been an important part of culture from time immemorial. In a work entitled *The Oaths that Bind Our Society Together*, David Webb from an anthropological point of view proposes that oaths were important for forging connections between people in a way to create social bonds. They defined the interlocking obligations and relationships important to the existence of a society.

Oaths were so important to the construct or fabric of society that the **prohibition** of breaking your oath, of breaking your promise to society, became an important principle in early Anglo-Saxon law – and eventually English Common law - and we have King Alfred the Great to thank for that.

In the 800's Anglo-Saxon society was bound together by a web of vows, pledges, and unretractable obligations. King Alfred listed all the laws in his kingdom and he began with the commandment that he considered to be the most necessary for every Anglo-Saxon man to keep. He insisted that every man keep his oaths and pledges. Instead of a prohibition of murder, treason, or some other heinous crime, he believed that oath-breaking was the greatest threat to the endurance of his kingdom.

In those days, Alfred was having a little problem with the Vikings. The Vikings reportedly always broke their oaths and were known as a people who could not be trusted. It seemed to Alfred that oath keeping was the virtue that most clearly distinguished a Christian nation from a pagan nation.

Indeed, in Alfred's courts, guilt or innocence was not determined by the presentation of evidence or witnesses. Rather, the accused needed only to

produce a certain number of “oath takers” – men willing to swear alongside the defendant that he was innocent of the charges brought against him. If a man was found to have sworn falsely, he would have had his property and possessions seized by the King, he would have been arrested and thrown into prison and his family banned from society.

Through the ages, the power and importance of oaths persisted and at times were cloaked with religious overtones. In English history religious oaths went beyond the requirements of Common law and more than a few English bishops and Archbishops found themselves in trouble having sworn an oath of allegiance to one crown only to have that king deposed and now facing a new king demanding their allegiance. But true to the sanctity of an oath, they were caught in a conflict. Loathed to break their oaths, their oaths meant nothing if they pledged to the new king.

So, oaths were the fabric of the culture. It was not just a promise; it was something much stronger, much more important. A promise was something you didn't break unless extraordinary circumstances required it. But an oath...you didn't break. Period! Why? Because doing so would be seen as dishonorable by your peers and losing your honor was quite literally worse than death. Honor was the central value to life, and one's word was the foundation for one's honor.

So what has Beowulf, King Alfred, and Henry VIII got to do with the Scout Oath and the Hippocratic Oath both of which I would argue are perhaps two of the most well-known Oaths in our society today. Let's think about both of them for a minute. One we know very well. I'm sure that many in this room have it memorized from years and years of reciting it.

Everything about oaths that I just talked about embodies the Scout Oath, doesn't it? It is the fabric that binds Scouts together but more importantly it goes beyond scouting and reaches into society. I don't think it is a coincidence that the first words of the oath are: “On my honor”. Based on our heritage, I can think of no

more powerful a personal statement in the English language than that. Three words that define our moral, ethical, and philosophic core values. Three words that might be more important today than ever before.

How many in this room have recited the Hippocratic Oath? How many have even heard of the Hippocratic Oath? I'll grant you that it is certainly shrouded in mystery as perhaps a lot of what we do in medicine. So allow me to briefly describe it for you.

A form of the modern Hippocratic Oath is taken by all graduating medical students or physicians stating their intentions to practice medicine ethically and justly. Historians do not know for sure who wrote it but it is widely accepted that it was composed in the fourth century BC by the renowned Greek physician Hippocrates – often referred to as the father of western medicine.

Through the years, it has been criticized and modified, but it has endured. The most modern version states:

I swear to fulfill to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant...

I will respect the hard won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk,

I will apply for the benefit of the sick, all measures which are required

I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.

I will respect the privacy of my patients....

I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being...

I will prevent disease whenever I can...

I will remember that I remain a member of society with special obligations to all my fellow human beings..

If I do not violate this oath...may I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling...

By swearing to follow the principles spelled out in this oath, physicians vow to behave honestly and ethically. It has endured because it defines the moral and ethical core values of what it means to be a physician entrusted with the awesome responsibility of another person's life. It serves as a powerful reminder and declaration that we are all a part of something infinitely larger, older, and more important than a particular specialty or institution.

And, like the power of the Scout Oath, the **need** for physicians to make a formal warrant of diligent, moral, and ethical conduct in the service of their patients may be stronger than ever with all of the challenges we face in healthcare. We must never forget what medicine's core purpose is in the first place. A testament to the importance and the power of an oath is the fact that a number of professions have called for a Hippocratic oath of their own over the past few years.

In closing, there is no question that society has changed dramatically from the times of the ancient Greeks, Beowulf or Henry VIII. All of us have our views on the challenges that face our society today, but suffice it to say that now more than ever we need to reinforce the qualities of honor, trust, and the importance of our word as a reflection of moral character and as the foundation on which to move our society forward. The next time you, Scouts and Scout leaders, stand up and say the Scout Oath or you, the physicians in the room, say the Hippocratic Oath, remember, just remember that your word is your honor, your honor is your being, and realize how powerful that oath can really be.

Thank you