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Association of Women Surgeons Presidential Address

Association of Women Surgeons 2020 Presidential Address: Sculpting our Future



A B S T R A C T

This article is a textual record of the Presidential Address from the Association of Women Surgeons Annual Conference in 2020. This year (2020) has been a tumultuous year exposing inequities in Surgery and health care. Even during these challenging times, the ability to sculpt our future rests in our hands. We will do this by returning to our values based on resilience, by advocating for equity, by speaking up for our future colleagues and by changing the perception of who may be a surgeon. Progress will require a change in the status quo so that a surgeon is defined not by her phenotype but by her strong mind, caring heart and skillful hands. During our journey, we will try and fail but we will not let failure deter us. We will collaborate with each other and our colleagues. Much like a sculptor who uses the fissures, cracks, and imperfections of the stone to guide her masterpiece, we too will use these challenges to sculpt our future.

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When I became president of the Association of Women Surgeons a year ago, I had high hopes for the year 2020. Our theme for last year's AWS conference, Sculpting our Future, brought to mind the image of the sculptor, sitting before a block of marble, slowing and deliberately carving a majestic creation from the seemingly blank, lifeless, piece of stone. It was as if we believed a masterpiece might magically spring from this block of marble, delicately sculpted by our surgeon's hands.

But alas, I am not an artist, and 2020 has been anything but delicate. Our vision for 2020 has been tested and weathered. The man-made and natural disasters of this year have been unparalleled in our lifetime: the COVID-19 pandemic and the toll it has placed on us both professionally and personally, the racism and police brutality resulting in the murders of Ahmaud Arberry, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others have underscored the inequities of our society, wildfires and hurricanes, and most recently the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a champion of gender equity. It is as if our beautiful piece of marble had fault lines buried beneath the surface, and with each tap of our hammer, we have exposed another fissure in the marble. Rather than conforming to our vision for this piece of stone, the year has revealed the cracks, the imperfections, as if the marble had a mind of its own. Not once, but again and again, our visions for this year have been altered.

But we, you and I, are survivors. We are resilient, we are warriors. And like the Venus de Milo, with or without arms, our future will emerge from the marble in front of us.

How will we do this?

We sculpt our future by being resilient. Our path has never been straight forward. As women in surgery, I know of no one who

started on this road and was consistently told that she had what it takes to be a leader in the field of surgery. No – quite the opposite. As women in surgery, from the moment we first felt the calling to surgery, we were told again and again that we were not enough. That we were not strong enough to be surgeons, let alone surgeons and people, mothers or leaders. Some believed what they were told and walked away from surgery. But not you and I, we were resilient, we persevered and became surgeons.

We sculpt our future by returning to our values. When the world is at its most crazy, a pandemic, cultural divides, racism, and micro-aggressions, when the world seems to be splitting apart at its seams, we return to our values. Equity, Advocacy, Integrity and Diversity. We believe in equity in our profession, in leadership, in pay, and in opportunity. We believe that by advocating for the lives of women surgeons, we will improve the lives of all surgeons, as well as quality of care for our patients. We know that truthfulness, honesty and integrity are crucial in our journey. We believe that the world of surgery is better for its diversity, embracing the wealth of knowledge and insight that is obtained through multiple perspectives. We return to knowing that we, you and I, are strong enough, smart enough, courageous enough, ambitious enough. We will return to the goals that we chose for the Association of Women Surgeons: to Engage, Empower, Excel.

How will we do this?

We sculpt our future by speaking up. We need to speak up more often. This is not easy; we need to use our hard-fought social capital to counter the microaggressions, to push the envelope, to question the status quo. Enough of accepting the inadequate number of women who are professors, chairs, who received grants, are

honored with awards or go into the field of surgery. Each day seems to expose a new inequity. Despite having women who have broken the glass ceiling, we still haven't leveled the playing field. We need to do this for ourselves and for our future. We must forge a path for the next generation, so when our residents, our medical students, our children have pursued their dreams of becoming a surgeon, they can concentrate on improving the lives of our patients, defeating disease processes, rather than overcoming prejudice.

We sculpt our future by changing the way the world thinks about us. Over the past few years, we have made progress towards changing the norms and perceptions of what a surgeon should be, how she should act, how she takes care of patients. #ILOOKLIKEA-SURGEON #NEWYORKERCOVERCHALLENGE #HERTIMEISNOW. We have taught the world that a surgeon can be compassionate, she can be kind, she can have soft hands and a warm heart. We are changing the way patients view us, the way our colleagues view us, the way society views us. We will teach our patients and our colleagues that the merits of a surgeon are not defined by her phenotype, her shape, her gender, her color, her accent, but by her strong mind, her caring heart and her skillful hands.

How will we do this?

We sculpt our future by collaborating. We are consensus builders, allies, and conspirators. From the earliest days of this Society, Patricia Numann collaborated with Claude Organ, to increase opportunities for both women and minorities within the world of surgery. We are working to strengthen our partnership with multiple organizations, from the American College of Surgeons, the Association of Academic Surgery, Society of Black Academic Surgeons, Latino Surgical Society, the Society of Asian Academic Surgeons, the nascent Association of Out Surgeons and Allies. We are increasing our collaboration, our interactions, our common purpose. Together, we are showing the world of surgery that diversity, in and of itself, is a worthy goal that benefits our profession. We are teaching that diversity is not limited to gender; it is inclusive of race, religion, sexual orientation, and choice of practice. Together, as allies we are moving this cause forward. You and I know we are better and stronger together.

We sculpt our future by listening to each other. While the world outside is crazy and some try to destroy our community and our profession, we must stop and listen to each other. We must hear each other's stories, acknowledge what makes us different, our colors, our religion, our experiences, and bond over what makes us alike. We must educate ourselves, and learn about each other, and stop and ask, and be curious about our differences when we do not know or understand. We will be joined by our mutual dreams, our hopes, our love of our patients and our profession. We will celebrate what makes each of us unique. You and I will stand up for each other and support each other and promise to amplify, sponsor, and mentor each other to build our future and the future of our profession.

We sculpt our future by overcoming and learning from our failures. And we will fail. We will try and we will fail again. We will mess up, we will forget to speak up, or we will speak up and we will say the wrong thing. But we must be compassionate with each other and when we fail, we must forgive. We must commit to teaching each other, sharing our experiences, and being receptive to learning. We must show each other compassion and forgiveness. And when we are the one who fails, we must treat ourselves

with that same compassion. We will not fear failure but rather be brave in spite of the fear. You and I have the courage to rise up and try again and again.

Next year, the Association of Women Surgeons turns 40 years old. And we are far from the organization which Patricia Numann started in 1981, when walking into a meeting, she was asked what type of nurse she was, or whose wife she was. We are far from the handful of women who could fit at a single table for lunch at the American College of Surgeons. We are over 3000 members strong, representing over 40 countries on 6 continents. Look at the women that we have as role models, the four women presidents of the American College of Surgeons, the dozens of chairs of surgery, the women who have run major surgical organizations, who lead the American Board of Surgery. Look at this community here today, that we have created, that supports, mentors, coaches, and amplifies each other. Look at what we have achieved. But we still have so far to go. We need to decide that enough is enough. That it is no longer acceptable to tell a woman that she shouldn't or couldn't be a surgeon, because she is a she, because she is too nice, too black, too brown, too queer, too religious, or too quiet. That surgery, our profession, our patients, our future, need you just as you are, and that you and I can make this a better world.

The year 2020 has been disruptive in so many ways. Our homes, our work, our Society, our world. For so many of us, our very being has been threatened. But what if 2020 is the year of clear vision. What if, for the first time, we are actually able to see us as we are? What if rather than imposing our vision on the marble, we stop and look at the marble, its fissures, its cracks, its imperfections, and we use that as a guide for our masterpiece? What if 2020 provided us with the unexpected clarity to actually see where we need to grow? What if 2020 was not the year that we wanted, but rather it was the year we needed - the year that allowed us to change our world, our Society, our profession and to Sculpt our Future?

I am deeply humbled to have been president of the Association of Women Surgeons. I am so very thankful for the mentors, the role models, and sponsors who have inspired me within this community. I want to thank the Council, for your hard work, clear minds, disparate points of view, and willingness to create change. But most importantly, I want to thank you, our members, who continue to impress me with your voices, your visions, your ingenuity. I have grown so much because of your collective resilience, strength, and honesty. Never forget that this is your Association, that your vision is vital to our future, our success and our mission. I can't wait to see what you create.

Declaration of competing interest

I, Sharon Stein, do declare that I have no conflicts of interest with respect to this paper.

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