Years ago I came across a brief piece of prose that I would like to share with you. It was written by author Cameron Hawley about a conversation he had with his grandmother shortly before her death.

On one of the last days of my grandmother’s life I sat beside her bed. Warmly reminiscent, she talked of how the world had changed during the half century since she had come to the Dakota Territory in 1878 as a pioneering bride. I asked what change she considered most significant.

Her face sobered. “I’ll tell you the one I most regret,” she said. “When I was a girl, there were so many men who stood out as individuals. Now there are so few.”

“More and more all the time, it seems, men are yielding to some terrible compulsion to conform, to think alike and talk alike – Yes, even to look alike. In those days you could recognize any man who was worth knowing as far away as you could see him or hear the sound of his voice. Believe me, no one mistook your grandfather for someone else. He was always his own man, thinking with his own mind, standing on his own feet. He knew that a man finds happiness by walking his own path across the earth.”

The intensity of her voice made her words an obviously purposeful warning, but years passed before I appreciated the full value of the heritage she was handing me.

Now fifty, looking back over my own life and the work I have done to date, I see clearly that the things of which I am least proud have resulted from the weakness of conformity from being more concerned with pleasing others than with satisfying myself.

My successes have come when I have had the sustained courage to follow my grandmother’s admonition – in her words, to walk my own path across the earth.
I would like to speak to the philosophy that Hawley alluded to - The Art of Independent Thinking.

My father was of this generation. He valued independence. He would often admonish me, “Don't depend on anyone for anything.” He personified what he believed. He dropped out of school in the ninth grade. He never attended college, but he was very accomplished as a carpenter. He could lead crews of other workers who built great buildings. I used to watch him on a construction site with awe, as he moved easily from one challenge to another. Along the way, he would be called on to use large construction equipment, handle a surveyor's transit to check elevations, and utilize a variety of other hand held saws, nail guns and at the end, produce an incredibly complex building or project.

His independence permitted him to build buildings without having to turn to others for help. It was not that he never accepted help or expertise from others, but it was a matter of pride that he could do it without help if necessary.

He accomplished this by observing, reading books, asking questions and incorporating all of it into a growing knowledge base that over time made him a very, very competent worker.

Independent thinking begins with some of the traits that my father exhibited. I would like to list a few of these and comment on their relevance as you begin your professional career.

Observing
I have long felt that keen observation skills are critical to the development of any individual but are indispensible to the creation of leaders. Leaders learn early in their development that good observation skills deliver better intelligence and insights that are critical to understanding people, things and situations. It is what permits them to lead effectively when others are satisfied with just following. The secret to developing good observation skills is to train yourself to be keenly aware of your surroundings and to gather information that may seem insignificant or unconnected at the moment. This becomes particularly important in relationships. When we first meet an individual, we are given their name, perhaps a smile and a handshake. We then begin the process of gathering information about that individual that over time becomes a mosaic. We get more pieces of the mosaic as we interact and learn more about them. With time we form an opinion of how that individual operates and what they value. They become a friend, an acquaintance or simply someone we have met. In each case, our observational skills help us to make that determination and permit us to interact more effectively.
VISIONING

We hear a lot about visioning these days, but little on how to develop accurate visions. Similar to developing observational skills, individuals who are good at anticipating the future develop the trait over time by devoting time and energy to learning about their surroundings. It begins with reading widely. I am not referring simply to books and online resources about pharmacy. A vision develops from reading and learning from a wide variety of resources such as newspapers, journals from fields other than pharmacy and pursuing information for information’s sake.

How many of us have begun online searching in Google only to have our attention diverted in a different direction by a hit that was not exactly what we had expected. I sometimes have to resist the temptation to follow the distraction, yet at other times it delivers useful and sometimes invaluable insights that while not planned are none-the-less useful.

But visioning is more than simply surfing the web. It requires structure and a plan for how that information relates to the task at hand. Most of you will change positions every five years. You need to begin planning for the first and each subsequent move now. It is easy to think that your first job will be permanent and that you will never move or accept a new position, but most new pharmacists will change jobs every 4 – 5 years. Managing that change requires a vision for where you want to be in 15 or 20 years and developing a plan that will insure that you get there. About the only constant in life is change, and the pace of that change is increasing. Develop a vision for yourself and pursue it aggressively.

ACTING INDEPENDENTLY

In our society, co-dependency is often viewed as acceptable. In my father’s generation, it was viewed as a sign of weakness. The truth is that it is often somewhere in between. Avoid letting others speak for you leading you into actions that you would regret. Becoming too dependent on others for validation limits our ability to make independent decisions and can limit our options. This type of group mentality is what often leads to bad decisions and shattered relationships, particularly in friendships and marriages. Becoming too independent leads to isolation and loneliness. I am reminded of a phase from the poem Desiderata (Things to be desired) that goes, “Do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.” Becoming too independent of others can lead to isolation and loneliness. The middle ground is where you accept advice and friendship, but in the end you form your own opinion and own your own actions.
CURIOSITY

Finally, I would like to address what I think is the single most important trait of independent thinking – Curiosity.

I am blessed to be the grandfather to four wonderful grandchildren. Three are approaching three years of age and more importantly, they are in the stage of development characterized with the frequent use of the word WHY? It often goes like this.

Eat your peas.

WHY?
Because they are good for you.

WHY?
They contain vitamins and minerals.

WHY?
They will help you grow up big and strong.

WHY?
And so it goes until the parent reaches a state of increased agitation and frustration leading to the use of the universal phrase

BECAUSE I SAID SO!

To which the child responds – WHY?

The child is in a period of their development where information is crucial to developing an accurate assessment of their surroundings and to forming independent opinions. Unfortunately, over time, society begins to weigh down on the developing adult and demands conformity. It is sad in a way, because we value curiosity in the child but as we attain adulthood, we lose that spontaneous behavior and begin to adhere to often unstated rules of behavior and action. I would encourage you to work to keep a sense of wonder and curiosity in your life and to encourage it in others. Our jobs as pharmacists demand care and attention to detail. That is important, but should not rob us of a zest for life and a curiosity for the things around us.

Acting Independently requires work, a vision and the ability to think and act as an individual. The reward is as Cameron Hawley’s grandmother so poignantly admonished, in finding happiness by walking your own path across the earth.

Thank You!