



Ebb and Flow

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As the bracing ocean water washes over my feet I feel the sand beneath my heels slipping away. Again and again, the strong waves hit the tops of my feet while the sand erodes, leaving me off balance. I am reminded of my life as a physician – so much knowledge learned in waves like the ocean, and yet so much slips away...like the tomato left to rot on the vine. The ebb and flow of medicine is a never-ending cycle. We can never know it all, and if we did, we could never retain it all. It makes me wonder if the ebb and flow of medicine sets one up for the episodic physician ‘burnout’ that is so prevalent today. Too many waves too quickly; too much sand eroded and we fall over and topple like the overripe tomato plant.

I have counted at least seven of these cycles in my career to date. Each one was preceded by something unprecedented – a board exam, an injury, the delivery of a child...that tipped the balance of the ebb and flow of medicine. Had I been my current wiser self at the time I would have said ‘this too shall pass’. In the midst of it, however, these moments felt ‘career ending’.

What if we could somehow see ourselves

as that ‘wiser self’? After the flood or fire, after the waves of self-doubt, and after the inner critic has been shut down...perhaps as the elder who picks us back up and sends us on our way...‘this too shall pass’.

Medicine is not kind to those who bear the responsibility of caring for others. It seems that we are somehow meant to bottle up our physical limitations once we don our long white coats. Physicians are taught to be superhuman; to not take sick days, nor take time to process during the storm. This concept is so ingrained in us that we often have a ‘superhero complex’, swooping in to save the day as only a physician can. Physician’s ‘self-care’ is not in the DNA of the classically trained physician. Perhaps this is why we are seeing so many sagacious physicians leave the profession. The physician’s superhero persona does not need care, or get sick or injured, or fall into a depression. The physician’s white coat bestows some form of invincibility to the wearer, and we bask in the glow of our ‘superhero selves’...that is until we fall from grace.

We need to recognize that we are human, and as such, take time for our physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional health

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needs. So often these things get 'bottled up' until later, until we can deal with them as physicians – but 'physician heal thyself' was never meant to be a 'batch' process. I do not know the origins of the self-sacrifice physicians are expected to endure. I can imagine that self-sacrifice in education stemmed from the Socratic method of teaching, which was based on being aware of how little one knew. In this method, questions are asked repeatedly until either the student gives a wrong answer or a faulty reasoning or the teacher is satisfied with the student's responses.[1]

This method, commonly used in bedside teaching, was meant to testify to the gravity of the physician's clinical acumen and highlight the importance of learning the correct answer. However, improperly applied, it may verge on pimping, which makes it dogmatic at best and humiliating at worst, and leads to the belief that the medical learner is insignificant and lowly.[2] In addition, residency training has a history of 'beating down' the humanity of the resident in order to make them clinically competent.

To my knowledge, no other profession trains in this way. We as physicians have the responsibility to change this. We need a better method to convey the importance of study while not losing 'humanness' in the process. As a professor to medical students, I have witnessed the catastrophic damage the Socratic method, misapplied, has done to a student when an

hierarchically senior individual does not know when to stop the questioning. Anyone who has lost a student or resident to suicide can recognize this system is toxic.

What if we were to reframe the ebb and flow of medicine? What if we were to step aside for a moment to gain our balance, rather than let the sand erode from under our feet? Even the ripe tomato that drops from the vine seeds the soil for the next season's fruit. What if we keep the ground fertile...but what is that fertile ground for you? For me it is recognizing when I need to 'step aside' to revive the joy of medicine. I find solace in getting back to my roots and finding the 'why' of medicine. What is your 'why'?

While we are learning a kinder gentler way to inform and convey the deep responsibility we carry as physician, perhaps we can be kinder to ourselves and to those we train. Recognize we carry a heavy load and at times we need to set it down. Recognize that we need to rejuvenate the soil so it is fertile again, and in doing so, our love for medicine can grow forth.

Just like the ocean waves that wash over our feet and the sand that ebbs away underneath, we can find a balance and not topple. I believe this is true in medicine, and it begins with small steps to keep ourselves balanced and like radiating circles from a pebble in a pond, others will benefit. The time is now.

References

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