

Seeing Wholeness

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SEEING WHOLENESS

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OCEAN WATER

We were a relatively large family of four children, keeping my parents ceaselessly busy. Nevertheless, my parents would manage to take a week of vacation once every few years to go down to Mexico. During that time, my grandmother and aunts would take care of the four of us. We would be giddy, without the usual after-school routines and restraints. We would run noisily around the house and empty a package of Chips Ahoy! cookies in one evening.

When my parents would return tanned and smiling, my father would pull out little bottles from his suitcase. He would explain that he had filled the bottles with ocean water and sand. After a brief moment of wonder, we would set the bottles on the bookshelf at the head of our beds and continue to play.

The small bottles of ocean water impressed something upon me, but I didn't know what. Reflecting on it now, it was that I was holding both a piece of nothing and something: this was simultaneously just water and an entire, vast ocean. It was my father's will to share, to impart and connect which turned the water into the ocean.

Today, in thinking about my transformation in medicine, those little bottles come to mind. My incremental, transformative moments in medicine are too numerous to tell; therefore, I offer this brief essay instead.

My hope in doing so is that these words will provide you solace and help dispel the self-critical fog that surrounds many of us.

POLARITY

I would have to say that in this moment, when I think of transformation in my medical career, I do not see a well-delineated change nor a defined process. I see my physician-self as a dynamic ocean, with waves crashing on a calm body of water.

The waves are the destructive emotions and thoughts that I have had throughout my training and practice. They are my perfectionism, severe self-judgment and self-doubt. They are my internal criticism at my lack of efficiency, lack of knowledge, lack of judgment, at my inability to learn from my mistakes. They are my thoughts of non-belonging to medicine, of being a failure, of being too fragile, of being indecisive.

The waves can grow big and become threatening. They can also grow small to the point of being imperceptible. The storm can rise in a flash, and it takes a long time to calm down. Despite it all, and contrary to the instability I feel when the storm comes, my internal drama is contained. That is where the body of water comes in.

Underneath the waves, there lies a radiant depth. It represents my growing understanding that my approach contributes positively to the lives of patients. That the unachievable truth and the inescapable uncertainty of medicine are not my fault. That my respect for the wholeness of patients and concern for their well-being sometimes has the ability to heal brokenness, though it does not heal illness. That deep respect and compassion are true medicine, not soft nor weak medicine. That striving to treat myself with respect and compassion is a journey, and that adapting my practice to my values and limitations is a commendable first step.

Thus, despite the sheer power of the waves, there is an underlying, perseverant calmness. Recognizing this dichotomy, and allowing the bad to dissolve into the good rather than the other way around, has taken quite a bit of transformation.

ESSENCE

If I try to pinpoint which events have led to this transformation, I am unable to. The narrative of my transformation is a sprawling forest of individual stories. Each story is as important as the next and they are all connected by their roots. They are stories of physicianship, motherhood, friendship and partnership. In considering the wholeness of my experience, my best offering in this moment is the essence of my transformation.

Transformation is
Setting boundaries
Instead of being crushed by what I cannot hold.

Transformation is
Accepting that not everyone wants help
Instead of bestowing help on everyone.

Transformation is
Knowing that my intentions matter
Instead of thinking that only outcomes do.

Transformation is
Recognizing when I am struggling
Instead of ignoring my mounting discomfort.

Transformation is
Accepting that I need to change
Instead of insisting that perfectionism serves my patients well.

Transformation is
Staying quiet
Instead of uttering unnecessary words.

Transformation is
Seeing my wholeness
Instead of only my brokenness.

Thank you. ■

Biographical note

Sandra Derghazarian is a neurologist and a coach for healthcare workers. Her greatest aspiration is to advocate for kindness and forgiveness in personal and professional everyday life.