



Read, Watch, Listen.
The Family of Medicine



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RECLAIMING JOY

I watched as her face glowed with excitement as she told me her MCAT scores. Her prospects of being accepted into medical school had just increased. This was her third attempt at the MCAT. She is a patient care technician who works in my hospital. We shared the same patients on many occasions. She had made efforts to seek my company whenever I rounded. As I looked at her face in her excitement, I remembered my own. Unknowingly, she gifted me with the memories of that time when I fought to enter our profession. I immigrated to the US at the age of 8. English was my third language. Because of this language barrier, I struggled with the MCAT. It was not the only barrier. My birth country and culture did not support women in higher education. In addition, my parents were poor immigrants themselves and I had to work my way through college and medical school on my own. Yet, I was not deterred. Acceptance into medical school was one of the joyous highlights in my life because it had been such a struggle.

Somewhere along the way, like so many of you, I forgot all of that and lost my joy as a physician. The workload, long hours, heavy responsibilities, electronic records, and attempts to meet impossible metrics squashed my love for medicine. Fresh from training, I had joined 3

other men in an internal medicine practice in Kansas. I remembered the oldest of the 3 men in his 70s said to me on my first day of practice, "I am sad for you joining medicine these days with such a broken system." Over the next 2 decades as a hospitalist, I realized how true his words were. These past 2 years during the pandemic worsened my attitude. Going to work every day felt heavy. I vacillated between anger and sadness.

In sharing her new MCAT scores and her excitement, my young friend suddenly brought me to a place of gratitude. I remembered the difficulties and remembered where I was and where I am now. It was as if a switch was just turned on. I remembered the excitement of scrubbing in for surgery for the first time, delivering a baby for the first time, placing a central line for the first time, intubating a patient for the first time, and being called "doctor" for the first time. My eyes were wide open. My mind had the humility of a beginner. Back then, no one could take my joy away.

So, what happened? I could name all the things that I feel took away my joy for medicine. Trust me, it would take a whole lot more than these pages could hold. I am not so "Pollyanna" that I do not see the destruction of our health system. Nor do I deny that anger doesn't come up when I witness the atrocity physicians must go through to care for their patients. However, I am at a place where I am sick and tired of being sick and tired. I have decided no one can take away my joy. I am no longer willing to give the power and control to another or a system. I get to reclaim it.

I started to reclaim my joy of medicine by remembering what brought me here in the first place. For me, it is the art of medicine itself and the connection with patients and colleagues. I felt thrilled to be able to diagnose the unique unilateral hyperhidrosis and vertigo associated with a stroke. I "get to" sit down with a stage IV ovarian cancer patient who failed treatment as she taught me the art of dying. I get to brainstorm with colleagues on challenging medical problems and finding shared vulnerabilities of "I have no idea what this is." I consciously chose facilities and hospitals that value my work. I chose practice partners that share the same philosophy in medicine and support my need for time away. I cut hours of working so I can tend to my own healing. It is in these things that I find joy while still working in a broken system. I have learned after nearly 3 decades in this profession, there is never a right time to make changes. If I don't do it now, it may never happen. As a physician working in acute care, I learned life is fleeting.

My young friend was accepted into the medical school of her choice. She did not have to say anything. I saw it on her face. I saw and felt joy.

This quote by Josh Shipp summarized it all for me: "You either get **bitter** or you get **better**. It's that simple. You either take what has been dealt to you and allow it to make you a better person, or you allow it to tear you down. **The choice** does not belong to fate, it **belongs to you**."

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