

Joy in moment of revelation: a cure for burn-out

More than midway upon the road of my professional life, deluged with multiple unmet deadlines, I turned to *The Lancet* for inspiration. There I began reading an article that focused on redesigning the research enterprise. In the article was a table listing the positive and negative motivations for an individual conducting research, and I noted this brief statement of one of the positive reasons, "Joy in Moment of Revelation." (1) It struck me. Poetic truth, stripped of definite articles, nouns building from one syllable to two to four, the melody from sonorous to cacophonous/caesura to mellifluous, the meaning from a human emotion, ephemeral, to eternal truth, utilizing words that resonate with the holiday season (when this *Lancet* article originally appeared), all of ancient Latin origin, but also firmly established in our English usage for close to a millennium.

Joy is still there, both joy from the rewards of patient care (the gratitude of a couple achieving a pregnancy and having a baby is unmatched in medicine); teaching (having a student or resident look up a question and cite to you the evidence always brings a smile of pride); and conducting research (submitting a grant, abstract or paper summons a Snoopy dance moment). However, these daily joys can easily be overwhelmed by the increasing drudgery of the profession, such as the ceaseless demands of the electronic medical record (why do I have to reconcile medications every visit and check so many boxes to send a Pap smear); the ever increasing number of mindless administrative emails requiring an answer (yes, I will attend the meeting, do the review, participate on the task force); the never ending required mindless online courses to maintain my job (yes FIRE for fire and yes I will avoid the active shooter and yes I will complete compliance training by the deadline); the constant certification and recertification of skills and knowledge (I think I know what yeast look likes on a wet prep by now and why can't I ever get all the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology answers right on articles that I have written); the increased demands for face to face teaching (yes I will spend six hours teaching a handful of medical students how to perform a pelvic exam and sit around waiting when one doesn't show up); the constant grant rejections (at least give me a score); and the increased regulatory burden (why can't we do an institutional review board application without 100 online screens, and let me count the number of times and variety of forms on which you can report conflict of interest). So yes, there are a variety of joys and a number of moments, some good and some not so, but there is a paucity of revelation.

It is the revelation that may ultimately be the most necessary prerequisite for a long career. Admittedly these have been the rarest and most fleeting of moments, though I remember them as clearly as I remember the birth of my children. Often years separate these moments as the research I now conduct exists mainly in five-year cycles and often must wait until the last pregnancy is delivered to be complete. Those moments when the data from a study are un-

blinded and an answer to the question posed emerges (usually unexpected) are to me among the most rewarding moments in my life. This joy in moment of revelation is not matched by the more mundane joys of subsequent events in the research process, such as having an abstract accepted for presentation or a paper for publication. That is joy of dissemination, not joy of revelation. The unblinding, the moment of truth, how often have we been wrong yet always surprised and invigorated by the answers we did (or didn't) find. Colloquially these could be called "aha moments," the poet Wordsworth called them "spots of time." These illuminate the next step, for the end of one study is always the door to another. These help sustain me through all the intervening mundane tasks.

I believe that there is in every medical student a desire for revelation which draws them to medicine. Sometimes it is a lingering doubt about an illness to oneself or a loved one (or the care rendered to treat that illness) that yields the desire to seek a better outcome, sometimes it is pure curiosity about illness without a personal link. Often because of its intimacy, this desire for revelation remains unspoken save for the early obligatory essays and interviews which may touch upon this as a reason for a medical career, but it becomes buried under debt, the many other demands of the profession and the lack of research possibilities ("Shades of the prison house begin to close/Upon the growing boy" to quote further from Wordsworth). But this spark is essential to maintain and nurture. What question, that will improve our health and wellbeing, do you want to answer with your career? Without the possibility for revelation, burnout becomes inevitable. Professional recognition, financial and academic security are milestones along the way, but without a larger quest, they can easily become millstones to maintain. Participating in research is one way to stoke the flame and renew devotion to a medical career over the long and winding road. One of the major failures of our current health care system is how few research opportunities exist for those who want to pursue them, for clearly as the low pay line at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development indicates, many have called, but few are chosen.

Nonetheless, at this point in my career, future research opportunities may appear less grand than once imagined, they still exist and this bottleneck in funding may be the source for new and improved streamlined models for conducting research. I remain inspired by those who have trod this same road before me. I read this quote recently from the obituary of Vernon Mountcastle, a pioneering neuroscientist at Johns Hopkins who died at age 96, who said this when he closed his lab after his long career, "This was my last experience in research. I was nearly brokenhearted to leave it, for I found no greater thrill in life than to make an original discovery, no matter how small."

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