



*This is a resident case log of a patient encounter in which
an “Aware Medicine topic” was central.*

Reflections on Residency

Looking back on the influences that led me to this place in time, I see many. Certainly my father with his gentle encouragement to serve others played a large part. My parents’ emphasis on the importance of education was key. Being the last of 5 kids and loved mightily by my older siblings also played its part. Then I find within me this unexplainable, persistent drive to find peace and fulfillment. I think at baseline, I carry anxiety. I don’t know where I got it ... and I certainly would trade it in if I could. I guess the blessing in it is the response to find peace. But how does one do that?

In midst of a rebellious phase in my early 20’s, a necessary phase, I dropped out of college in a quest to explore the world outside of the prescribed framework. I questioned everything anyone told me at that point. I was vexed by what I was going to do with my life. I imagined that if I found the “right path” that I would find peace and happiness. Hitch-hiking across Canada, a newfound friend gave me a book to travel with. It was a book by Carlos Castenada. In it I found a kernel of advice that rang true at the time and has stayed with me since.

“You must always keep in mind that a path is only a path. Each path is only one of a million paths. If you feel that you must now follow it, you need not stay with it under any circumstances. Any path is only a path. There is no affront to yourself or others in dropping a path if that is what your heart tells you to do. But your decision to keep on a path or to leave it must be free of fear and ambition. I caution you: look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself and yourself alone this one question. Does this path have a heart? All paths are the same. They lead nowhere. They are paths going through the brush or into the brush or under the brush of the Universe. The only question is: Does this path have a heart? If it does, then it is a good path. If it doesn’t, then it is of no use.”

Between that time in my 20s and now, I’ve traveled a number of paths. I entered medicine later in life than most. The pivotal event leading me here was the experience of being present for and serving my father in his dying months. Though difficult, it was ultimately one of the most fulfilling of my life and impressed on me the value of the caregiver. This, to me, seemed a path with heart.

I graduated from residency three days ago. I finished my last day of clinic today. Over the past 5 days I’ve been moving from my apartment into storage in anticipation of a month free; no Epic, no pager, no medical duties. Can you believe it? I’m happy about it and I’m also beat. The question that comes up is how do we maintain our compassion in a system that works us silly? How do we follow this path with heart without losing our own in the process? I’m not sure I have a good answer, but in reflecting on what helped me survive I would list these:

1. make time to hang out with people who love and value you.
2. eat on as regular a schedule as possible
3. sleep a minimum of 6 hours each night
4. take time for quiet reflection daily
5. commit to regular exercise
6. stretch several times weekly
7. read for fun when possible
8. maintain a generous heart, be kind to those you work with and care for.



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That’s it. To survive this path with heart it’s critical that you first take care of your own. It’s your right, it’s your responsibility. Many will count on your ability to take care of yourself, so be good to you.