

BALANCING FAITH, FAMILY & PRACTICESM

Finish Line or Starting Point?

The Completion of Med School Closes One Chapter in Life and Opens Another

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I began my medical studies at Georgetown University Medical School in 1998, riding high on what I knew to be God's calling on my life. The first two years were pretty uneventful, save a few frantic phone calls home to Mom and Dad the night before big exams and some crazy neuroanatomy lab partners—par for the course, I'm sure.

Then came the clinical years, my reward after two grueling years of hard work. I'd heard that this is normally an exciting time for third-year medical students, and my experience proved no different. The endless hours of study in the library came to an end; pressure ulcers would not threaten my backside again! I was standing at the threshold of God's life for me.

Sure, there were moments I dreaded the scut work that accompanies the lowest rung of the clinical medicine hierarchy. It won't be long until I am a senior med student and can pick on the little third years, I would reassure myself. But I kept plodding away with the finish line drawing nearer.

The biggest challenge I faced during that time was the selection of a specialty to pursue. I devoted much thought and prayer to the decision. I was torn between two

vastly different fields: orthopaedic surgery and family practice.

I read and reread Proverbs 16:3,9 and John 15:7-8, considering the application to my life. I kept waiting for someone to hit me over the head and drag me off by my hair to the Lord's choice of residency. However, God had a different idea; He sent no caveman with a club forcing me to choose a particular path. I was left to decide and, in the end, I chose to apply for orthopaedic surgery.

In the home stretch

When my roommates and I hit the one-year mark to graduation, we began a weekly countdown of picking a playing card from a deck—each of the 52 cards representing one week of the year. We numbered them, asked different classmates to sign each one and taped the cards to the wall in our living room.

That final year, the daily grind of rotations caught up with me: Another lost weekend. Another 40-hour "day" on call. I knew medicine was going to be a sacrifice, but was I prepared for this? I was tired. I was burned out. I was in my 20th year of formal education while some of my friends were out

making six figures, taking vacations and thoroughly enjoying life. But this would be the culmination of all my goals and striving.

By this point, the field of medicine was not as pure and idealistic as I once envisioned. My eyes were opened to insurance woes, the difficulties of making nursing-home placements, and disgruntled, ungrateful patients. One such patient was an otherwise healthy, middle-aged woman who came into the ER at 2 a.m. complaining of shoulder pain.

"Chest pain?" I asked, concerned about an atypical presentation of an MI.

"No."

"Nausea? Vomiting? Sweats?"

"No. I just banged my shoulder on the countertop three weeks ago, and it still bothers me."

"So what is it that made you say, 'Tonight is the night to have this looked at?'" I questioned politely but cynically.

"It just hurts real bad."

"For three weeks?"

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“Maybe four,” she replied.

“Did you think about seeing your primary-care physician about this?”

“Silly med student, my doctor’s office isn’t open at 2 a.m.”

And so I gave the obligatory chuckle, bit my tongue, walked away to order X-rays and ibuprofen, and tried desperately to remind myself that everyone is created in God’s image.

I also witnessed situations that epitomized the cynicism that oftentimes perverts medicine. A dying patient in the ICU was being kept alive with the aid of machines. His family never visited. With the decision to withdraw life support, residents and nurses gathered around, some placing bets on how long he would last. Whoever guessed 28 minutes took home a prize. That disturbed me; it reminded me of the soldiers casting lots for the clothes of our fallen Savior as He hung above them from the Cross.

These more sobering experiences did not shatter my image of what medicine can be. I knew this was where I was supposed to be. Our heavenly Father would also use patients to minister to me and to encourage me in my endeavor to become a physician.

One Saturday evening, a few friends from the Christian fellowship group at school and I went to a homeless shelter where we threw a party for the mothers and children. One mother stood out; she had a limp and a sickly appearance.

At the hospital the following Monday, I happened to see this same mother wheeled by on a bed. I caught her room number and, because I was on call that night, I visited her during some downtime later that evening. The Lord opened the door for me to pray with her—the first such experience in my young medical career. When I made a return visit to her room, she thanked me for the prayer and said she was feeling better.

A new beginning

I raced toward the now visible finish line, passing my remaining rotations and taking my place with the Georgetown Class of 2002. After graduation I did not go out and buy myself a new luxury sports car. I did not run off on an exotic vacation. Instead of a wild celebration, it was a time of introspection. Now that I had achieved the goals I set for myself in med school, how would I approach the future? I had reached my quarter-life crisis.

The medical education process is consuming. I worked 90 to 100 hours per week for more weeks

than I care to recall. I missed holidays with family, engagement parties and reunions with friends. My CAA (church attendance average) was less than .500 as I was often on call, post call, or simply doing weekend rounds on a Sunday. Yet this was my niche, my purpose. So why was I still searching? I tried making a new list of goals to achieve, spanning the areas of relationships, career, finances and leisure. However, this wasn’t the solution to my dilemma.

The answer came to me during worship at church. The words of a praise song hit home: “Give me one pure and holy passion, give me one magnificent obsession, give me one glorious ambition for my life, to know and follow hard after You.”

God spoke to me through the collective voice of the congregation. I was to be obsessed with Him, not with His will for my life. He is to be my pure and holy passion; He is the goal—the prize—to be pursued with all of my heart. So I tore down the idol of achievement and determined to not let my calling distract me from the One who called me.

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