



Perspective

Being Human in Medicine: Fabulous Failures

by Himanshu Agrawal, MD

It's 2:00 a.m. and I am a junior medical student in India. I haven't eaten in two days and am worsening my heartburn – and my heartbreak – with black coffee and a cigarette. I can feel the sense of doom grip my fundus. A senior medical student whom I barely know staggers into the cafeteria, happy to have a brief respite from his overnight rotation. “Why the long face?” he asks out of genuine concern. The tears erupt, uninvited – “I did horrible in my USMLE Step 1 exam!” I tell him. I hardly know the guy, but I am in mourning, so shame be damned. “There, there! It can’t be *that* bad. How much did you score?” Envisioning my entire future evaporating in front of me, I manage to say the numbers: “197.”

The man takes a step back, and his hand instinctively rises to stroke his chin. It’s as if he has heard someone mutter a terminal diagnosis. “Hmm...That *is* bad! Well...with a score like that, you won’t be able to get into internal medicine...the only US residency you can get into is psychiatry...”

Suddenly, he meets a reaction he did not expect – a wide grin appears on my tear-smudged face. “Really?! But that’s what I want to *do*! Psychiatry!!” He looks at me with surprise, then smiles. “Well then what are you crying for? Let’s celebrate! This cup of tea is on you, my friend!”

The year was 2000. Psychiatry was not nearly as competitive as it is now, and international medical graduates still got interviews in American programs. So much has changed in the last twenty years, but some things remain the exact same. You see, looking back, this random stranger had no idea what he was talking about – he was certainly no authority on USMLE scores, successes and failures – but, like so many others, he was a speculation-guru, a pundit of

pontification. Unknowingly, his prophesizing was exactly the piece of straw I needed to stay afloat!

Hopelessness cast as large a shadow on my future back then as it has for several of my medical students. And sometimes, it is as quickly dispelled as mine was that fateful day by that clueless senior student (sometimes it takes a bit longer).

I am writing today for all my students who have recently faced despair or who may one day meet with crippling news. This Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, this latest recipient of Edward J. Lennon Endowed Clinical Teaching Award, this boy from New Delhi who grew up without running water but who now swims in a 29,000 gallon swimming pool (feel free to insert your own yardstick of success) – I was once ready to walk away from it all. I was ready to throw in the towel.

I am *so* glad I didn't.

Remember two things– firstly, you are not as good as they say you are when you succeed, and you are never as bad as they say you are when you fail. Secondly, you will never cherish success more sweetly, than when you have had to swallow the bitterness of failure.

Do I wish you failure? Of course not. What I am saying is this – there is more to life, *so much more*, after failure. Failure is not the same as defeat.

They say nothing succeeds like success. They have not seen the daily grin on the face of this Fabulous Failure.

(Dedicated to Roda Sir)

Himanshu Agrawal, MD, DF-APA, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health at MCW and co-director of the psychiatry clerkship. He serves as a small group facilitator in the Kern REACH curriculum.