



Associate Director's Corner

Each of us is Worthy of Being Chosen

By Cassie Ferguson, MD

Dr. Ferguson shares her thoughts around the scarcity mentality and how we can each reclaim our purpose and remember that we are enough...

Beginning at the moment I decided to go to medical school—the moment I opened up the UCLA course catalog to figure out how many quarters it would take to finish all the pre-med requirements—it felt as if I was giving up ownership of my life. The 26 medical schools I applied to (25 of which I was rejected from) determined that I would pick up and move 2,000 miles away to Wisconsin, leaving behind family, friends, and a two-year-long relationship. The USMLE chose what specialties I was good enough to pursue. The complexities of the NRMP couples matching system dictated that my partner and I interview at 30 different residency programs and rank 90 distinct permutations before determining that we would move to Colorado to begin our life as a newly married radiologist- and pediatrician-to-be.

The Scarcity Mentality

This is, of course, the reality for most people in this country: life's circumstances narrow what feels or is possible. We are typically in the position of *asking for* acceptance: we *apply for* schools, jobs, apartments, car loans. Our sense of agency in these processes—the feeling of being in control of our lives—can be stolen by racism, sexism, ableism, poverty. Agency may also be dulled by what Stephen Covey termed a “scarcity mentality”: we are told, and come to deeply believe, that there is not enough for everyone to get what they want or even what they need, and we therefore must always hustle to prove our worthiness.

I would argue that this scarcity mentality is rampant in the system of medical education and fuels fear, unhealthy competition, and desperation. As a medical school applicant, I was constantly reminded of how unlikely it was that I would be admitted to any school, let alone have a choice in where I matriculated. In medical school, my colleagues and I were hyperaware of the small number of residency spots in the coveted “E-ROAD” (Emergency Medicine,

Radiology, Ophthalmology, Anesthesiology, Dermatology) specialties. Even as a graduating fellow, I was advised against sharing that I was pregnant during job interviews and told to wait to mention that I wanted to work part-time until *after* I had secured a job.

Never Enough

This “culture of scarcity” that we operate in as medical students, trainees, and professionals drives a “perpetual felt sense of ‘never enough’” (Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*). As Dr. Brené Brown explains, when we are afraid that we are not enough, we often respond by desperately trying to prove how extraordinary we are. When reality does not match the idealized image we are trying to hold up, shame, over-comparison, disengagement, and narcissistic behavior can result, vices that are unfortunately overrepresented in our profession.

It was not until I had been an attending physician for several years that I woke up to this culture of scarcity and realized that the omnipresent fear of rejection had taught me to ask for and accept less and less because a little was better than nothing. Somewhere along this path, I had forgotten that I was allowed to consider what I wanted from my life, that I was allowed to ask what serves me. I had forgotten that my worthiness was not reflected in acceptance letters, board scores, or job offers. In forgetting, I had lost sight of who I was both in and outside of the medical profession. I had lost sight of my purpose in this life beyond passing the next test and clearing the next hurdle.

“Purpose is an essential element of you.” Chadwick Boseman

In *The Path Made Clear: Discovering Your Life’s Direction and Purpose*, a book gifted to me by four MCW graduates, Elizabeth Gilbert wrote: “Here’s the question. *What have I come here to do with my life?* That’s the question that begins every single quest. *What have I come here to do with my life?*”

To reclaim my agency and gain clarity around this question, I have made it a practice to talk about, reflect on, and write about my purpose, a term defined by author and UW-Madison Clinical Professor Dr. Christine Whelan as, “using your gifts, in keeping with your values, to make a positive impact on the lives of others.” [Dr. Whelan](#) outlines a useful exercise aimed at writing a personal and practical purpose statement that begins with asking yourself three questions: *What matters most to me? Why does it matter? How do I make it happen?*

It may have been a while since you’ve asked yourself these questions, particularly if you have, like I had, forgotten that you are allowed to take accountability and ownership for your own journey. This week, may we give ourselves permission to pause and remember; remember our purpose, remember our why, remember that we are more than a list of acceptances and accolades.

And as we turn our focus toward the Match and our graduating students, may we also remember that each of us is worthy of being chosen.

My purpose statement: Because I value love, beauty, and social justice, I will use my gifts for giving care, bringing calm, and facilitating change to positively impact my family, my students, and the marginalized.

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