



Perspective/Opinion

The Brothers Karamazov and meaning in medical school

By Justin Chu, MA

The following piece is the second in a series about “Why Meaning Matters?” The purpose of this thread is to contemplate the impact of meaning on human experience through individual examples of “Lived Meaning” with direct implications for flourishing and the ends of medicine.

*“The secret of man’s being is not only to live but to have something to live for.”
– Fyodor Dostoyevsky*

The above quote by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in The Brothers Karamazov provokes thought into the practices and perspectives that infuse meaning into life. As medical professionals encounter humans during vulnerable moments, one medical student shares his reflections on relational encounters in medicine as framed by Dostoyevsky’s novel...

Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* is a literary classic: a murder mystery, love story, and philosophical treatise gathered into one. Dostoyevsky addresses many issues relating to morality, religion in society, and personal culpability. Amid the interweaving of deep questions and penetrating narrative, Dostoyevsky, through the famous Grand Inquisitor, declares, “The secret of man’s being is not only to live but to have something to live for” (p.247).

While this assertion appears to be made only in passing, I would like to highlight a particular character whose narrative reflects “having something to live for” or, put another way, “meaning” through a perspective that might be emulated by medical students. This character is Alyosha, the third and youngest brother of the “*Brothers Karamazov*” for whom the book is named. Alyosha represents a paradigm for one who remains committed to integrity, equanimity, and humanity in the face of constant calamity -- a challenge that medicine similarly poses to trainees and practitioners alike.

Alyosha Karamazov and meaning as friendship

Alyosha’s family members are described as psychologically unstable, entrapped in alcohol use disorder, and engaged in the exploitation of vulnerable people. Their family name “*Karamazov*” is uttered by both them and their neighbors to describe the *Karamazov* bloodline as inescapably

immoral, prone to corruption, and abuse of power. In contrast, Alyosha, a student of the monastery, is described as naïve and pure (though not haughty) to the world (see, e.g., pp. 31-32).

Despite this seeming naivety, Alyosha acts as an agent of reconciliation. To a formerly cruel and manipulative woman, Alyosha inspires repentance and a recalling to virtue within the woman (3.VII.3). In the emotion-driven ending of the book, Alyosha chooses to care for a family that was personally insulted by his brother, and in doing so draws an entire class of schoolchildren from enmity to reconciliation (Epilogue.3). In an ironic reversal, the book ends with the line, “Hurrah for Karamazov!” The name a banner no longer of immorality and injustice, but of friendship and goodwill (p. 729).

Alyosha’s narrative holds truths for those in medicine because he inspired reconciliation among broken people by appealing to the kinship of humanity. Alyosha’s portrayal as being naïve to the world is an illusion. He was fully aware of the misdeeds of his family and the potential for their destructive tendencies to manifest in his life. Yet, he deliberately cultivated his character and wielded his integrity in the healing of relationships. Alyosha likewise never appealed to his morality or purity in his actions, but instead drew attention to the significance of human relationship—friendship—as integral to a fulfilled human existence. So, while Dostoyevsky poses no direct answer to his challenge that humanity seeks “not only to live but to have something to live for,” I propose that human friendship—viewing relationship with another as greater than one’s individual self—is integral to the answer (p. 247).

Meaning in Medical School

Physicians face many challenges in medical practice. Of increasing concern are reports of moral distress and physician burnout.^{2,3} Hope is not an easy virtue to cultivate in this current climate of division and uncertainty. However, Alyosha teaches us that hope exists above poor circumstances, and it is rooted in relationship with one’s fellow human being. One might think it fanciful to claim such a high value for friendship in a society and a profession that often seems diametrically opposed to unity. However, as Alyosha faced continual doubts that external circumstances would compromise his virtue, one realizes that individuals must continually work to cultivate virtue, for its own sake.

As I approach my third year of medical school and clerkships, a grievance I sometimes hear about the medical system is that doctors are more rushed, impersonal, and merely churn patients through their practice. Two years of flashcards and practice questions (though building foundational knowledge) has not helped this mindset in myself, as my medical education has thus far been largely spent refining my study habits to become more efficient... so that I can study more. However, my clinical exposures have been of immense benefit in helping remind me that meaning in medicine—medicine’s reason why—is found in encountering and caring for patients, humans. After all, the patients are what make the profession, and the goal of medicine is for the patient’s good.⁴

In my clinical apprenticeship in the emergency department, it was tempting to view some patients—such as those with chronic conditions who refuse primary care follow-up, frequent fliers, or patients who routinely miss specialist appointments—as causing somewhat of a nuisance. However, seeming “inefficiencies” in the medical system do not necessitate an absence of care. Although we could not cure the elderly patient with sciatica, she was still brought to tears and beyond thankful for us taking the time to explain that physical therapy was the long-term solution (and not a barrier) to maintaining function and be with her granddaughter. Patients would thank me for listening, even though they knew I, as a medical student, had little say over their treatment. Unburdened by many of the responsibilities a full clerkship student would have, I had the privilege to take my time to listen and learn from these people in the ED.

Although sacrificing empathy for expediency is a choice medical professionals may make, I would be remiss to not recognize that significant environmental factors are playing into that choice. Yet, this harkens again to Alyosha’s example, where Alyosha, against the belittlement of his family and in rejection of his heritage, sought to derive meaning from friendship, thus motivating his care for others. Similarly, I am increasingly convinced that self-established goals, whether as a response to burnout, motivation for career, or a life philosophy, must be grounded in virtue and fulfilled in the real-life practice of community. And it is here, when goals are combined with virtues and put into practice, that one experiences meaning. For me in clerkships, this might mean taking the extra minute to ensure that the patient felt I was listening to them, recognizing that their humanity extends beyond their illness.

A commitment to humanity, as Alyosha possessed, is formidable, but this commitment reaches deeper than medicine in recognizing the physician as also human and in relationships. For me, this perspective provides a grounding that cannot be similarly described in other pursuits such as grades or accomplishments that are only temporally significant. Three months from now, in the thick of rotations, I hope to look back to these simple, tip-of-the-iceberg musings on a complex novel and remember again the importance of humanity to the meaning of medicine.

References

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