



## ***Perspective/Opinion***

### **Karmanye Vaadhikaraste**

*By Himanshu Agrawal, MBBS, DF-APA*

*Who are we learning from, anyway? Is there a place for medical students to teach their teachers? Dr. Agrawal thinks there is. He shares a few lessons he has learned from his students...*

In the Hindu Epic text, the *Mahabharat*, it is said that the warrior Abhimanyu learned war tactics and strategies while in utero, as his warrior father, Arjun, explained them to his (understandably disinterested) mother, Subhadra.

I am not certain who I learned from when I was in my mother's womb. I do, however, recall that in childhood, I learned from my mother, my father, then my grandmother, then my friends, and then my schoolteachers. In medical school, I learned from my professors (mostly how *not* to teach). During my postgraduate training, I learned from my patients and my preceptors. More recently, I have been learning from my wife and my son.

Through my psychoanalyst, I have finally begun to learn how to learn from myself.

In 2016, I joined the big bad world of academia. I tell folks that the reason I joined MCW is because, ever since graduating from my child psychiatry fellowship, I had been sorely missing teaching students. Today, Eileen Peterson's kind invitation to write this helps me realize how silly I have been; the truth may be quite the opposite...

**...that the reason I joined MCW is because I had been sorely missing being taught by my students.**

So, what are some of the greatest lessons I have learned over the last 6 years from my beloved MCW students? Here are some examples (some details are disguised because I do not have implicit permission from the individuals involved to reveal their identity):

1. My students have inspired me to speak hard truths to an authority figure's face.

I was at a large educational retreat at MCW. A medical student (we shall call them Yoda) had just given a compelling and constructive criticism of the pre-clinical years. Dripping with frustration, a senior educational leader yelled, "If the lectures have so many flaws, and you are getting most of your medical education from elsewhere, why don't you just show up in your third year!?" I instantly felt the humiliation that I thought the student might be feeling. Here is someone who showed the courage and vulnerability to speak about a difficult topic to a group of authority figures and was being attacked instead of being heard. "I can't speak for others, ma'am, however I can say this for myself: I have asked myself that very question several times in the last 2 years..."

(And here we are, several years later, with a comprehensive revision of the curriculum.)

2. My students have taught me that if during medical training, a teacher tells you a physician must place their training and their practice above everything else - *everyone* else - including oneself, then those teachers are wrong. These teachers are overinfluenced by a curriculum from 1900.

A little while later, I was attending an MCW CEC (Curriculum Executive Committee) meeting. One of the agenda items was how to address instances of unprofessionalism when a medical student asks for time away from rotations in a dishonest way.

"Remember that one student who told three different rotations the same story - that they needed to attend their grandmother's funeral? Little did they know, education coordinators talk to each other!" As I listened, I realized that something was nagging me, however I could not quite put my finger on it...

3. My students have taught me that I must be kind when I tell my fellow teachers this hard truth, for they are overinfluenced by this archaic method of teaching and learning because that is what *their* teachers - their *gods* - taught them. It is difficult to stand up to one's gods.

...I remembered the courage that medical student Yoda had displayed at the retreat and raised my hand (revealing to myself that I was scared, like a child in a classroom, asking for permission to speak to the adult in the room). I bleated, "I was wondering what might be going on in that student's life that they feel the need to kill the same grandmother three times?" There was an intolerably long silence, and then the leader of this group spoke. "That...is a very fair point." "A really good one actually," agreed another person. Then, there was a general wave of head nods across the room, and I finally started breathing again. This incident obviously occurred before MCW's leadership decided to have Thursday afternoons as protected time for all medical students.

4. My students have taught me to feel comfortable in my skin; to embrace who I am. They have taught me there is space within the world of academia to be cheesy, playful - impish even - and to continue to examine the insecurities that lie underneath; to strut around MCW like it's a giant Bollywood movie set. I work at MCW because MCW accepts me for

who I am, and my medical students were the first ones who helped me believe that (*'OMG, Dr. A! #Same!'*)

**Thanks to my students, I have learned that even though I cannot be a good teacher all the time to everyone, I can try and be a good student all the time.**

This lesson has helped me weather narcissistic injuries and inevitable disappointments. To find a way to continue investing in this bi-directional road of knowledge - and wisdom - without being jaded or disheartened:

**Karmanye Vaadhikaraste**

*"You have every right to work but not expecting the fruits out of it. Let the focus be not on the fruits and never be inactive."*<sup>i</sup>

**Dear students -- you are my children. You are my parents.<sup>ii</sup> I have completely, utterly, undeniably, unashamedly, fallen in love with you.**

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For further reading:

Menon B, Narayan SK, Bhade S. COVID-19, Moral Injury and the Bhagvad Gita. J Relig Health. 2021 Apr;60(2):654-662. doi: 10.1007/s10943-021-01210-z. Epub 2021 Feb 26. PMID: 33635446; PMCID: PMC7908940.

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<sup>i</sup> Bhagvat Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 47

<sup>ii</sup> Child is the father of man', My Heart Leaps Up, William Wordsworth