

# Many Happy Returns

Category: Silver Linings

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As we mark one year of COVID-19, I am reminded of my uncomfortable relationship with anniversaries. Cyclic completion may warrant celebration, but also self-monitoring: *How many of my goals have I met this year? What have I missed? What can I do better next year?* Under this lens of surveillance, any repetition can start to look like regression. Circular time, for all its recurrences and renewals, chafes against the idea of linear time, which prizes productivity, trackable progress toward an aim, a forward-looking mindset.

This year in particular, I've felt sunk by stagnancy—as I know many others have—frantically treading still waters, with no dry land in sight. For as long as I can remember, I've “islanded” my time, partitioned it neatly into archipelagoes of accomplishment. If I wasn't chasing grades, it was an internship, a job, a publication. Though often overwhelming, this sink-or-swim mindset also provided some degree of reassurance: the illusion of control over my personal future. The pandemic, however, effectively shattered that illusion.

Between the compounded uncertainties of virtual medical school interviews, deferred test dates, and cancelled work opportunities, premedical students like me have experienced pressures unlike ever before, as we try to maintain standards of performance and perfectionism. This internal tension plays havoc with medical culture, whose subjective evaluations can seemingly crowd out room for personal shortcomings among trainees and stigmatize public disclosures of hardship.

Meanwhile, the shared ordeals of a pandemicized application cycle have foregrounded other, more implicit rites of gatekeeping that long predate the virus. Just as not everyone will have the accommodations of broadband internet access or a soundproof, mahogany-lined office from which to conduct virtual interviews, so, too, do underrepresented, low-income applicants perennially grapple with socioeconomic barriers to accessing medical education.

Still, the current revolutionizing of our health-care system is encouraging. Meeting fellow applicants and hearing about their endeavors—even through the tinny sound bites of a breakout room—has reaffirmed my love for medicine and reminded me of the privilege in working alongside such aspiring minds. Though many aspects of this remotely lived year have felt recessed and withdrawn, my hopes are that these new pockets of reality can sculpt a space for reimagining—for vulnerability, for equity, for how we try to account for “lost” time. Perhaps the time lost to COVID-19 wasn't time lost at all, but time returned—a cyclical invitation to reexamine the origins we distance ourselves from.

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