

My Medical Leave of Absence

Category: Finding Balance

written by Vicky Lam | March 7, 2023

“A blessing in disguise.” I heard that phrase many times at the height of my illness. When someone is about to die, or when the future looks bleak, it’s hard to practice that philosophy. But, for some reason, I was able to. I kept my doctor’s appointments. I followed my treatment regimen. I heeded the advice to take my mind off my work in medicine. I took things one day at a time.

“One day, almost dying is going to seem like a good thing.” I didn’t care how unlikely that sounded. I believed it.

That was two years ago, in 2021.

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Ten years ago, in 2013, something planted a seed in my mind to pursue a career in medicine. From then on, my life revolved around giving that goal my best shot. I thought I had to. Every year, tens of thousands of applicants compete for a few hundred seats in any given class of aspiring doctors. For this, I gave up a lot of aspects of my life. Aspects that would have made me a more well-rounded physician, a better physician. But I was admitted to one of those seats and began to make my way through the rigorous medical curriculum.

Then, because of an inexplicable luck of the draw, life happened to me. And it allowed me to slow down.

In 2021, as my illness began to improve, I was left with a lot of free time and energy. It’s quite scary when you give someone who used to do eight hours of memorization a day, every day without fail, the free time to pursue other things. Positive, mental-health kinds of things.

I made several groups of close friends.

I got to know my community better.

I found new ways to serve my community.

I found a sense of mission in my career beyond serving patients clinically.

I found a sense of belonging in Philadelphia.

And I grew even closer to the people that I was already close with.

Now, in 2023, as I look toward the excitement and the likely emotional whirlwind of my third year of medical school, I have a strong support system. I have strong coping mechanisms. I have an unwavering mindset of being able

to take on anything that life throws at me.

I am not afraid anymore.

That was my medical leave of absence at Drexel University College of Medicine. Or, as I see it, a much-needed entrée into finally being present and finding balance in life.

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