

dear residents

Yes, Medicine is Still a Calling

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Dear Residents,

I read Dr. Rosenbaum's latest article on the current upheaval in medicine [On Calling — From Privileged Professionals to Cogs of Capitalism?](#) where she explores the emerging concerns about workforce exploitation and the prioritization of financial success resulting in misalignment between corporate and educational priorities. Dr. Rosenbaum highlights how the pandemic supercharged the already brewing disillusionment of many. She discusses the concerns of educators who are tiptoeing around what they view as erosion of professionalism. It's clearly a complex dynamic between "when I was a resident" vs. "quiet quitting." She concludes that whether medicine is a job or whether it is a calling has no "right" answer - beliefs about work are personal.

As you are well aware, upholding our educational mission and optimizing your working conditions is my top priority. In speaking with colleagues from the northeast where the discontent has catalyzed trainee unions, I am relieved that we are nowhere near that level of discontent. While we are far from perfect, with plenty of annoyances, I hope that I am not misreading how you feel about your work - while it is challenging and hectic, it remains meaningful. I would like to believe that this time in your career witnesses an overlap between your passion (what can the world do for me?) and your purpose (what can I do for the world?).

I recently read a thought-provoking book, [Midlife](#), by Kieran Setiya, a philosopher at MIT. In one of the later chapters, *Living in the Present*, Setiya asks us to list our daily activities. These are "telic" meaning that they aim at terminal states - when they are done, the activity is exhausted. I can imagine your daily routine on a non-call day. Wake up well before sunrise, head to work, find a parking spot, hustle to the rounding room, get handoffs from your overnight buddy. See your patients, check your charts, start your notes, order consults, respond to pages/epic chat, check labs, get ready for rounds. Watch the clock - hustle to conference, try and stay awake, see your patients again, address their concerns, confer with others, finish your notes, write orders, discharge someone, feel hunger pangs, get a snack, tidy up your sign out and at some point, hand off your patients and go home. These are clearly telic activities - you get all these discrete tasks done and when they are done, they are complete. So, where is the calling? The calling is the space between all these telic activities - it's called "doctoring"* - it does not have an end - it is "atelic" - you do not complete "doctoring." You are and remain a doctor. The pleasure of doctoring is knowing that your work is meaningful, that your patients are grateful, that diagnosing and treating and caring are rewarding. That you do all of this is a calling. You were called to this profession (there is written evidence for each of you and I have it - it's your ERAS personal statement).

Trouble arises when your daily telic work is so jam-packed, that there remains no space for what Setiya refers to as the rules of life:

- You have to care about something other than yourself. If you are in perpetual survival mode, there is no room to care about something other than yourself - this might be the best justification for work hour limits, days off and team census limits.
- Your life must make time for activities with existential value - contemplation, awe, time with loved ones.

- You must embrace loss - there will be plenty of things you will not do or have to pass up. Setiya insists that without the capacity for loss, we cannot engage with the world.

Residency training is a telic activity that one goes through - it has several traditional features and several modern-day enhancements, guided by the increased appreciation that being well and living well are still possible without sacrificing your learning or the care of your patients. There are tradeoffs and there is loss and there is overwork and occasionally boredom. But there is always meaning, and you are drawn to it and it's why you are here. The trick is for my watchful third eye to never to let anyone take systematic advantage of your commitment to the profession. Humanizing your work is the best antidote to quiet quitting. Reforming the telic does not diminish the atelic - it might just enhance it.

Warm regards,

Dino Kazi