

dear residents

The Shortest Day of the Year Adjacent to the Longest Night

Dec. 21, 2021

Dear Residents,

As the year closes, this is a time for inward reflection. Not the kind that shows up on end-of-year reports or evaluation forms, but the quieter kind that asks who we are becoming, what we value, and what makes our lives feel meaningful rather than simply successful. **Rainer Maria Rilke**, in [Letters to a Young Poet](#), urged him to “to have patience with everything unresolved... and to try to love the questions themselves.” It is a reminder that some of the most important work in a life cannot be rushed, measured, or checked off a list.

Reveling in the superb match results, I have been thinking a great deal about success and ambition, and how they intersect with the idea of an interesting life. Medicine trains us to seek answers quickly, to master complexity, and to move decisively toward solutions. These are essential skills. But Rilke’s invitation asks something different of us as people: to stay with uncertainty, to allow questions to shape us, and to trust that meaning often emerges slowly, almost imperceptibly.

The philosopher **Kieran Setiya** offers a helpful complement. He [distinguishes](#) between **telic** goals, achievements with clear endpoints, and **atelic** activities, the ongoing practices that are worthwhile in themselves. Much of medical training is necessarily telic. Exams, rotations, the residency match, fellowship placement, the first “real” job. These milestones matter, and they shape careers. But when life becomes only a sequence of endpoints, something vital can be lost. The practices that sustain curiosity, attention, and presence are what make a life not just successful, but interesting.

[Writing](#) in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Ilgen and Dhaliwal remind us that **uncertainty is ubiquitous in medicine** and that “*clinicians may go to great lengths to reduce uncertainty, often perceiving it as a threat or source of stress.*” Yet some of the finest physicians I have ever known have made a different kind of peace with uncertainty. They are not the ones whose names appear most often or whose careers seem most meteoric. They are the ones who listen carefully, think deeply, and remain open to being surprised. They **live comfortably with questions**, not because they lack rigor, but because they understand that curiosity, humility, and attention are essential clinical virtues. Their lives are rich not because of recognition, but because they continue to grow inwardly as well as outwardly.

Despite my recent awards and my significant role as your program director, what sustains me has less to do with external recognition. It is the internal work of reflection, humility, and growth. Medicine remains endlessly interesting to me not because I have mastered it, but because it continues to ask something of me, both intellectually and humanly.

I am proud of where you have matched and all you have accomplished. Many of you will discover new knowledge, become leaders, and achieve professional distinction. These achievements matter, and you should take pride in them. But my deeper hope for each of you is simpler. I hope you lead interesting lives. Lives shaped not only by what you achieve, but by what you attend to, what you wrestle with, and what questions you allow to remain alive within you.

As we step into a new year, I encourage you to pause and reflect. Ask not only where you are headed, but who you are becoming. Ask what questions are quietly forming in your heart, and whether you are giving them space. Success will come in many forms, but meaning is something we grow into, often without noticing, as Rilke suggests.

I want to close with a moment from my first day as a rheumatology fellow. It was eerily quiet on the consult service... until midnight. That very first consult was a young woman with new-onset lupus, arriving in crisis with cardiac tamponade and severe kidney injury. I remember feeling overwhelmed, convinced that I needed to act flawlessly, as if the entire weight of competence rested on that single encounter. Dr. Frank Arnett stood beside me, calm and steady. After we stabilized her, he said quietly, "Slow down. See what is really in front of you. Then you will know what to do."

At the time, it felt like guidance for an emergency. With distance, I realized it was something deeper. It was permission to resist urgency for its own sake, to stay present, and to trust that clarity comes not only from action, but from attention. **In Rilke's terms**, it was an invitation to live the question rather than rush to the answer. **In Setiya's terms**, it was a reminder that meaning resides in the practice itself, not just the outcome.

Wishing you a year ahead that is both successful and deeply interesting.

Warmly,

Dino

PS: The patient with cardiac tamponade was admitted just after midnight. I was the rheumatology fellow on call. It took real courage to wake the attending, who also happened to be the division chief. Dr. Frank Arnett arrived within fifteen minutes. The patient had a malar rash and swollen joints. There was little doubt that she had lupus.

We started with intravenous fluids. Cardiology performed a bedside echocardiogram and placed a catheter to drain the pericardial fluid. Her kidney disease was already advanced. We treated her with cyclophosphamide and pulse-dose steroids. She ultimately required dialysis, but the rest of her lupus came under good control.

She became my clinic patient, and I followed her for all three years of my fellowship. When I left, she had just been cleared for a renal transplant.