

Soaring hearts

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‘It always seems impossible until you have done it’, the coffee shop blackboard assures me. Tacky as this may seem, I find it reassuring and briefly uplifting, if not inspirational. I walk past it, wheeling my bike after unsuccessfully attempting to cycle up the hill.

‘Everyone can do cartwheels except me’, my son lamented at breakfast, ‘and they keep doing them in front of me’.

I see people cartwheeling by me as I struggle with my overwhelming job as Director of Student Wellness. Colleagues running large clinical trials with conventional CVs and those with teaching philosophies and large grants cartwheel past me up the promotion ladder while I lurch from student crisis to student crisis.

My work life feels like a battle ground where the provision of student support juggles for space amidst a to-do list of backed-up research tasks. ‘Hold those suicidal thoughts – I’m submitting a grant application.’ I snort and remind myself that having meaningful work and helping people is my main driver, and that ticking boxes for my career has never interested me.

I absent-mindedly complete one of my own burnout questionnaires while I am waiting for the students to arrive for my wellbeing workshop. After this, I know I have a series of appointments with students who have booked in to see me. On some days, it feels that for every student I help, there are another ten who are struggling. I know I need to adjust my perspective – many medical students are fine, they are thriving, they love what they are doing. But where are they? Not talking to me. From what I have read, part of it may be a generational shift, with young people being more motivated by extrinsic motivators rather than intrinsic ones, and social media unhelpfully flaunting an elusive perfect life. And of course we like to select perfectionists for medical school, who with their underlying anxiety will be sure to get things done, to ‘close the loop’ as a surgical friend says. I consider the process of taking a group of people with these tendencies, putting them all together so that they can compare themselves to each other as well as to their ideal selves, giving them demanding work, huge workloads and multiple deadlines, and then wondering why their psychological health is going downhill!

And then there is the question of nature versus nurture. How much can I help these students change anyway as I lovingly talk about self-care techniques and burnout prevention? We know our brains are plastic, but perhaps I am fighting a losing battle against modern methods of upbringing. Are young people these days raised in a way that will help them develop resilience?

“That’s alright, love, have another go.” “There aren’t any losers here.” “Everyone’s a winner, baby” – until you get to medical school, and then here I am to help them pick up the pieces. My mindfulness training points out that (a) I am feeling exhausted and being cynical, two of the core features of burnout, and (b) I am completely distracted from my teaching. Refocusing on the task in hand I finish my workshop and then hand out some student evaluations. Someone writes, ‘I don’t want to be rude, but I don’t want to be taught this stuff by someone who is, like 50’. I can take feedback, of course I can, but I only turned 50 last week, and have just discovered that I clearly must look it. I determine that at my next wellbeing workshop, I will be accompanied by a swathe of young doctors to work alongside me, primed to extol the relevance of each of my teaching points. Recently graduated doctors fresh from the ward, who will enthral the students with their stories of patients’ blood and doctors’ sweat and tears. Then perhaps they will learn the link between our own health and our patient care and the importance of prioritising wellbeing.

I turn up my empathy dial and my focus, and start the student appointments. ‘I’ve never told anyone this before and I really don’t want to talk about it, but I think I might be depressed.’ I listen, we talk, and I say that although I am not their doctor, I think they may need to see their doctor. They then tell me that they tried to talk to another clinician about it, who told them they’d better harden up and suggested that medicine may not be for them. I apologise on behalf of the profession that they received such an inhumane response. As they leave, I feel despair that a prevalent treatable condition is I such a heavy secret dragging people down, and that there still seems to be so little understanding and acceptance.

Meanwhile, here I am waging war against the stigma with my little wellbeing curriculum. Why isn’t it working? On a day like today, it feels like me against a broken system. These lovely bright young people who want to do good in the world. Let’s capture their spark and be inspired by them instead of dampening it. Let’s lift them up instead of grinding them down. Please, please can we use their youthful energy to infuse the profession with new life and ideas, instead of bullying them into submission?

There is a lunchtime meeting where someone from the main campus is passionately talking about the loneliness of many Arts students. They state that people can go for days or weeks at a time without speaking to anyone. Apparently, nowadays when students sit next to someone in a lecture theatre or squeeze into a table at lunchtime, they look at their phones. Each trapped in a virtual bubble, incubating depression.

The speaker tries to motivate us by steering us towards solutions: ‘Let’s discuss some initiatives to get people talking to each other again.’ I feel disengaged and somewhat dispirited, disinclined to talk to the well-meaning person on my right. Inwardly I giggle at the thought of taking out my phone and texting my partner to suggest that we talk with our teenagers tonight about appropriate phone use.

At the end of the day, I rush to a leadership workshop held next to a beach, feeling like a middle-aged person on a bike as other cyclists cartwheel past me. I booked a place on this course months ago on a rare day when I was under the illusion that I had time to focus on

myself. I know that today I am in a negative frame of mind, but it would be ill-mannered to withdraw now. I force myself to join the circle.

‘So what exactly is it you are aiming to do in your role at the university?’ Eager faces swivel in my direction. We are asked to come up with an image or metaphor for our work. But I can’t get past the first question. I turn inwards on myself.

‘Yes – what exactly is it that you are trying to do?’ my inner voice asks harshly, smirking at my discomfort and hesitancy.

As I leave, I breathe in the sea air, and watch the seagulls taking off into the distance, looking like a child’s line drawing of flying birds, black silhouettes against the darkening sky. And it comes to me then that this is what I am doing with my work. I am simply helping medical students learn to fly – by teaching them skills, mending some broken wings, and giving them confidence to try new things; encouraging them to expand and explore their limitations and boundaries, then watching them as they soar into the distance.

Walking back along the beach to my bike, I pause as I see a broken shoelace on the ground in the same gull shape, the waxed end a beak, the frayed edges, wings. It looks like the top part of a heart lying on the hard sand in front of my boot. The strangeness of the coincidence unnerves and delights me. So I am almost unsurprised when I pop into a local gallery to buy a birthday card on my way home and am confronted by a wall with four magical seagulls, pieces of beauty, sculpted from glittering sand. I muse that it is only when the wings are open that the heart shape forms. Encased in bubble wrap, they transform my backpack with renewed energy and hope as I head back into town.

Those sand-sculpted seagulls have been on my office wall for many years now. I call them ‘Soaring Hearts.’ Hippy metaphor or not, I like it. Because that is what I am trying to do here. One day I hope we can all allow our young trainees not to be closed off and defensive, scared and perfect, but vulnerable and able to safely learn from their mistakes, to grow and fly: ‘Spread your wings and your heart will open, and you will be a good doctor’. For if your wings are clamped shut, you might never allow your heart to be seen, to be able to reach out fully to another person, to connect and heal in the most therapeutic way. We know now that this will replenish you both.’

That moment on the beach changed things for me. A mindshift, which reminded me of my purpose, and made me ready to meet the next challenge. I know that there will always be work to do, assisting and empowering generations of students, but now I am ready and waiting for it, whether it is tackling bullying or a pandemic. Of course, a symbolic piece of art isn’t a magic bullet. Some mornings, I wake up feeling overwhelmed, and some nights my tangled worries and impossible workload stretch out ahead of me, tipping me in and out of jumbled insomnia or nocturnal problem-solving. But there are those golden afternoons, where I look at the gulls on my wall, my anchor in the storm, and remind myself that I am doing my best, and that all of us, including the students, are forging ahead. They are learning to open their wings, tentatively discovering themselves as they progress, and I am helping them to do so.

When COVID hit, I saw so many of us become more than we ever thought we could be, scrabbling for solutions, feeling like different people in a different world, staff and students floundering in uncertainty, our trusted protocols abandoned. But we did what was needed, taking things one step at a time, endlessly adapting our programmes and approaches, showing up day after day to produce the next generation of capable, open-hearted doctors. A new frontline of healthcare workers, with emphasis on the 'care', capable of looking after themselves and their patients together. I am filled with gratitude that I am involved in this meaningful work, and I realise that although my cycling ability has not improved and my CV remains proudly unconventional, my inner critic has, at least for now, been silenced.