



# Graduation, Identity, and Gratitude

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This spring, those of us graduating medical school are poised to finally enter the workforce, many of us for the first time. Yet, despite all the training leading us to this point, I feel unprepared. Stepping into a new role in residency is one thing—the changing demands on our schedule, the heightened responsibilities, and the arduous work hours have been reiterated to most of us since the beginning of medical school. But perhaps what is less obvious is how this new role will shape the trajectory of our personal lives, what adopting the mantle of a professional identity will mean for each of us soon-to-be graduates, as people.

The way we structure our lives is not so complicated. Despite the many ways we find to occupy our time, the main force governing how we spend our time is work. For many of us, our experiences with *work* up to this point have primarily consisted of studying, our professional lives put on hold until we all inevitably step into the role of resident physicians this spring. The work at that point will be different, and despite all our training, I do not think enough space has been given to discussing this new identity, the new *people* we will inevitably become. What does it mean to be a good resident? And how will our work identities, dominating as the demands of residency are, shape us as people?

These are big questions, and in order to help answer them, I want to extend some thoughts from the pioneering positive psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. At its core, rather than focusing on deficits and pathology, positive psychology seeks to explore human behavior through the lens of strengths and optimization. Csikszentmihalyi has written extensively about various topics, but the one for which he is perhaps most well-regarded is the concept of *flow*. Flow is defined as a state of experience in which one's strengths are well-matched to the challenge at hand. During states of flow, people's mental faculties are optimally engaged,

leading to an experience of complete immersion in a given task in which time seems to pass more quickly. Csikszentmihalyi argues that engaging in flow states is an important component to one's overall quality of life [1]. He applied the concept of flow to talk about work, saying the following: "There are two main strategies we can adopt to improve the quality of life. The first is to try making external conditions match our goals. The second is to change how we experience external conditions to make them fit our goals better" [2].

As residents, we will not have much flexibility to control our external conditions, which will undoubtedly be governed by work. That leaves us to consider what our goals are, both professionally and personally, and how we aim to accomplish these goals with the inherent time constraints of residency. Csikszentmihalyi argues that how we occupy our time *outside* of work is equally important in terms of cultivating a sense of meaning out of life. By reframing how we experience these rigid time constraints of residency, we might be able to more intentionally engage in our time spent off the clock, budgeting free time toward meaningful activities that can improve our personal identities. With this in mind, we can draw distinctions between time spent outside of work decompressing versus time spent in meaningful recreation. It is the latter sets of activities that have the potential to result in flow states, and it is these activities that we need to intentionally seek out when we are not at work. Taking time to reflect on what activities challenge us and bring us joy, whether that be yoga, cycling, or practicing the viola, and taking time to incorporate these activities into our daily routines can help ensure we maintain a healthy balance between time spent resting and time spent in meaningful hobbies or interests. By spending regular dedicated time in these challenging yet engaging activities, we can work to access flow states outside of work that push us to expand our personal identities and improve our overall quality of life.

Notable physician and author Oliver Sacks is a notable example of someone for whom meaningful time spent outside of his work as a physician was key to how successful he felt his life to be. Facing metastatic cancer and nearing the end of his life, Sacks reflected on his life and his career in

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his final book *Gratitude*. Despite all the impressive professional accomplishments under his belt, he spoke less about these and more about the relationships he nourished and the joy with which he experienced the world, saying, “I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude” [3]. It is crucial that we not take for granted the limited resource of our time, especially our free time. How we choose to spend it can have important implications for the types of physicians and the types of people we wish to be over the course of our careers.

Our identities as physicians are only starting to develop. And though we will need to continue investing in our professional selves, my hope is that we can look outside our professional lives and envisage for ourselves a world in which our work identities are but one facet of our ever-evolving, complex selves. Whether work is our primary identifier or not, my hope is that we can all take the time to find meaning in all aspects of our lives, always taking stock of what we will be grateful for when our professional lives finally come to an end. Identifying opportunities to access flow states outside of work can help us engage our non-work selves now, strengthening our personal identities so that we may be better workers, spouses, lovers, and friends

and be able to look back on our lives one day and see our full, illustrious, selves dancing before our eyes, revealing a life rich with accomplishments, personal fulfillment, and ultimately, gratitude.

## Declarations

**Disclosures** The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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