

WRIGLEYVILLE

WOES

Simon Lopez, MD

The best advice I was given about my failures over this past year was from a dead man while I was 39,000 feet in the air.

Wait, I should probably clarify that...

While on a late night flight to a blusteringly cold Chicago for a residency interview, I did what every person bored on a flight in 2017 would do: I listened to a pre-downloaded podcast. However, due to my overzealous monitoring of my phone, I had drained the battery to a point where ordering my Lyft in 10° F Chicago at 10:13PM would soon prove difficult. Surrendering to the hum of pressurized air, coughs, and turbines, my eyes caught the cover of the in-flight magazine with *West Wing* creator Aaron Sorkin on the cover. In it, he was interviewed over his directorial debut and was questioned about the fears of failing at such an endeavor given his respected track record as a screenwriter. His response included a quote attributed to Winston Churchill that has stayed with me since:

“Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.”

For lack of a better word, my last two years of medical school could best be described as difficult. Despite a successful undergraduate career, master’s program, and two years of classroom medicine, the veneer of my successes began to wear thin. Suddenly, I was batting a solid .500 on six clerkships during my third year and batting even worse this fourth year. This left me wondering at times how I made it this far in the first place with 5 failures behind me, 2 of which were in a row (not even counting a board

exam). Clearly, I have failed more in medical school than I have succeeded. It would be easy to say that I’ve taken these failures in stride, but each one came with a mental break in my functional status. Hope was shaken, at times even broken, but never absent. Yet, clearly someone or something was at fault.

The easy way out would be to blame the person in the mirror and give up on him, but learning to forgive is far more important. To forgive the person who was once called into a meeting with his second grade teacher alongside his parents over concerns of cheating, but who simply had the unfortunate gift of having a brain that worked faster than his body, leaving math assignments completed without any work shown for it. To forgive the person who spent his eighth grade spring break writing summaries of newspaper articles on the behest of his English teacher who told his parents she was concerned that he was writing papers in a manner that assumed the reader already knew what he was talking about. To forgive the brain of a person that wasn’t wired for medicine and science. That for every algorithm on how to treat an unknown thyroid condition there is always 10x more information readily recalled on movies and lines from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” That by forgiving myself for my failures, efforts could better be spent on finding these concerns in future patients and addressing them head on while making sure the proverbial glass was truly half-full.

As the flight began descending over Chicago and the lights of Wrigleyville started to pierce through all the clouds, I found

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myself searching for their silver linings. In them, I saw how being pulled out of my third rotation to essentially learn how to learn again for two retakes back to back also gave me the time to meet the girl who captured my heart for a moment (much to the probable chagrin of my campus dean when he discovers that). I saw the glimmer of how having to retake a \$1,285 board exam gave me the opportunity to spend a week one-on-one with my grandma in the same condominium I grew up in almost two decades ago. And if I peered through that window at just the right angle I could see how every program that opened their doors to me did so out of a complete interest in who I am outside of a 3 digit score or a four-lettered word. I began to realize that with each failure came an appreciation of what I could be thankful for.

Throughout these many years of medical school, I have continued to work hard in my studies despite my stumbles. While the number of those stumbles may be high (okay, really high), it has always been one less than the amount of times I've gotten back up. I learned from my mistakes and continue to do so through

unprecedented guidance of faculty, friends, and my own self-discipline and forgiveness. In time, I will appreciate my medical degree more than some others, because it came with more sacrifices and emotional scars than a normal medical student should ever have to bear. You would hope that learning from these failures will make me a better physician, or at least a better chef or something. I've come out from all of this understanding that even in the most stressful of times, there is always something that can be latched onto for hope. And that hope is best shared with the people around you. Whether it is the patient across from you in an exam room dealing with a less than stellar A1c recheck or a budding soon to be fourth year with a less than stellar record behind them, being their silver lining during those failures gives them the hope they need to get up and try again.

From failure to failure, without loss of enthusiasm. ■

Dr. Lopez graduated from the Florida State University College of Medicine in 2018. He is a first year family medicine resident in the Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare Family Medicine Residency Program.

A close-up photograph of a leopard resting in a tree. The leopard's face is the central focus, with its green eyes looking directly at the camera. Its fur is a mix of tan and brown with dark spots. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting a forest or savanna environment. The tree branches are dark and textured, framing the leopard's face.

LEOPARDESS IN HER ELEMENT

Nicholas Ott, Class of 2022

Nicholas Ott is a first year medical student who enjoys capturing meaningful travel experiences through photography. He envisions one day combining his passions for service to others, medicine, travel, and photography.