There are days when I need a day

BY HOLLY BELGUM

There are days when I need a day. A day to close the books and the laptop and ignore the incessant notifications from classmates posting study resources and must-read articles—and did anyone get that detail from slide 32? A day to forget about the impending test, the ticking hours, the list of antibiotics yet to memorize and the brain regions to review. A day to stay up late and write. Yes, write. Do medical students do that? Is it allowed, beyond the concise medical histories, lists of chief concerns, assessments? Can medical students really have other talents, other skills grown dusty with disuse, other lives they could have chosen? A day to dig into the feelings you let slip beneath a surface littered with the day-to-day—the to-do lists, the lab reports. Those feelings that need more than a 15-turned-to-90-minute Facebook, Netflix, Reddit or other vegging site of choice mental break. The ones that need a turning of the earth, a walk, a glass of wine and time to sort. The relationship that ended. The family matters. The attitude adjustment, for whatever just feels off. They need a day. And more than that, a day to wake up in the Boundary Waters with only the water and buzz of mosquitoes at dawn beyond the tent walls. A day for a walk through woody silence, bare soles slipping through the grasses, a gentle toss of unbrushed hair, a light and flowing summer dress donned again. A day that’s not your one day free so you better fill it with those friends you never see, the grocery store, the bank, the errands. Don’t forget to relax. So maybe not just a day. Maybe a long guilt-free weekend, a month, a sweet last summer? But shouldn’t you be researching? Shadowing? Building a clinic somewhere?

Another life, then? The other lives you might have lived, the lives you plan to weave into this large and lovely one you chose that only now, you realize, takes up your time and energy so easily. When will the time come to write the book and keep up with those novels and biographies and sing jazz and send cards to your Granddad and sleep enough and do your hair and find that one person who’ll put up with your long hours and studying on Friday nights and fall in love and bike across southern France and satisfy those parts of you that could have lived another life, with philosophy and theology, and all the other -ologies you could have chosen for a field? But you chose medicine, and when you place that stethoscope around your neck and don the white coat that needs washing, those dreams and that day-wishing disintegrate.

A knock on the door and I’m no longer my focus, it’s not a day for me I’m dreaming of. It’s for him, cradling his arm. It’s for her, head upon the chair. A day for him, without the pain of an 8-out-of-10 intensity all-day, all-night headache. (How that must feel, I can’t imagine.) A day knowing it’s not a stroke, like your husband had. (I’m so sorry to hear he passed. How are you doing?) A day free from the cancer that’s come back. (I don’t know how to tell you this.) Give them a day, I don’t need mine. Give them a month. A summer. A year. Another life.

I go back home to bring out the books, to write the reports, so that I may learn and learn and learn. I’m so lucky to be here learning, learning how to help.

So I give my days to you. My days, my months, my summers, the other lives I might have lived. Yes, I’ll take some for myself. I’ll sing a song at the talent show and find the time to fall in love. I’ll stay up late one night and write; neuroscience will wait. I’ll visit my Granddad and see my friends, if not as often as they’d like. But many, many days I’ll give to you, in hopes that I might help you live out yours. As you choose to live them, like I, so gratefully, have been able to live mine. MM

Holly Belgum is a third-year medical student at the University of Minnesota. She wrote this story, which received honorable mention in Minnesota Medicine’s 2015 writing contest, after a long day of lectures and studying. “When I began writing, I was feeling the drain of long hours and memorizing scientific facts day after day. I missed the balance I’d come to love during my liberal arts education. As I continued to write, my thoughts wandered from each day’s tasks to those I was here to serve. It was a bit of a personal revelation, and one that I kept with me through my first two years of medical school. Now in my third year, those reminders of my purpose—the patients—are with me every day, and I feel only more grateful to be here.”