

## Only joy in our work will sustain us in COVID-19

Written by Dr. Rose Zacharias on January 28, 2021 for CanadianHealthcareNetwork.ca

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It's day one of my first clinical rotation as a third year medical student.

I anxiously navigate the maze of corridors and find the elevator that takes me to the fourth floor. I'm relieved to find my small group of six. Only two minutes late. We're chatty and nervous. I notice the tallest of us has a suit-jacket under his short white starchy coat—an attempt at professionalism that's left him a bit squished inside the fabric, but I get it. My palms sweat. I want to make a good impression too. I'm wearing nylons. I never wear nylons.

It's 6:02 AM and we're in a dimly-lit concrete hallway, hearing the steady beeps of monitors and clinical voices beyond the closed doors where we've awkwardly gathered. This is the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the most prestigious quaternary care teaching hospital in the country. Soon we'll be ushered in, but at this moment we're respectfully waiting for our preceptor, standing alert, excited. There are 24-weekers inside that room who weigh little more than a pound of butter. Apparently, preemies can be born with their eyelids fused. All the mystery will soon fade. Our textbooks are going to come alive. The slightest, yet profound shift is taking place inside my identity. I am becoming a doctor.

The loud ding of the elevator startles us and we turn to greet the man we've only known by name. Here is the Chief of Critical Care Medicine, Senior Scientist in the Postgraduate Medical Education Program and Leading International Researcher in ventricular septal defects. He's as wide as he is tall—a five-foot square with Einstein hair and tiny wire glasses balancing nearly off his nose. His white coat is long and fits him well, with bulging pockets sewn on the outer four quadrants of this substantial frame that now stands directly in front of us. "It's a privilege to meet you all. Let's go inside."

So I get the tour I'll never forget. That day, twenty years ago, I walked past rows of isolets warmed from the inside to within one-tenth of a degree. I saw nurses meticulously hovering, parents quietly rocking in their chairs. I even witnessed the successful resuscitation of one precious neonate after a sudden apneic spell and then stood out of the way of the activity flurry that followed. There were so many incredible things that impressed me inside that NICU, but one thing in particular has never left me. I never became a pediatrician but

this has nothing to do with that.

Afterwards, he walked us back out into the hallway and explained a lot about what we'd seen. Clearly he was an expert of perinatal medicine, yet so humble and at ease. We were being educated and inspired. And lastly, his most impactful statement. "I can't believe I get paid to do this."

Ironically, I don't remember being particularly struck by that statement when he said it, but now I lie awake in bed at night, remembering. His established prestige, six-figure salary and even command of the room seemed immaterial to him. The way he delicately adjusted the nasal prongs of a newborn, the way he shared a warm smile with the nurses, the way he came alongside worried parents and listened. It was all so effortless, genuine and healing.

As doctors in this pandemic, our stressors are numerous. We've become weary over complex patient demands, disappointed by our inefficient system and angry and isolated inside our harsh judgmental punitive culture. Our patients have died, our practices have become unrecognizable and many of our marriages haven't survived. We're searching for new rhythms to life without the beautiful people we lost to suicide. How then, will we be restored? Nothing external has the power to build us back up.

Yet, there will be thousands of us who rise after this pandemic has been managed. Do you wonder what such a resilient doctor possesses, even now? This quality of fortitude is called joy. And if you think joy is flaky, dismissible or even worse, equivalent to happiness, you have it all wrong. Happiness is an emotion. Joy is a commitment to a state of mind. The Institute for Health Care Improvement's 2017 white paper *IHI Framework for Improving Joy in Work* calls joy an "essential resource" and defines it as a vital combination of hopefulness, confidence and psychological safety.

So what does it mean for a doctor to cultivate joy in work?

- **Invest in yourself.** Hire an executive coach who'll help define your strengths and identify your life goals. We delegate much lesser tasks to experts. Why would establishing professional and personal congruence have any lesser priority?
- **Build safe relationships with your peers at work.** Learn to see and care about your colleagues. Try the following:
  1. Observe your colleague and identify an emotion you see them display. Is your colleague frustrated? Say to that colleague "You seem frustrated." Is your colleague positive and cheerful? Say to that colleague "You seem positive and cheerful."
  2. Next, you pause. If nothing comes back, that's OK. Your next step is to stay quiet and pay attention. Maybe your colleague will open up and share some of their story. That is the beginning. If they don't, that's ok too. Look for another opportunity and do it again.
  3. Eventually, it'll work with someone and the authentic conversation and sharing of stories that follow will be a foundational truss in the iron bridge you are building towards each other. Don't be discouraged if the people in your workplace seem very different from you. This approach works with them too. There's something in everyone that makes way for connection when it is genuinely offered. Everyone is looking for authentic conversation and real friendships at work right now.
- **Understand that your life is bigger than you.** We're part of a complex system of controllable and uncontrollable factors. We have one part to play. My faith perspective takes it one step further. I believe the things I am unable to control are *controllable* and this ability lies in the hands of Someone who is good. What are your moral, ethical and possibly spiritual convictions? Seek to understand and apply them and your work will have deeper meaning. Practical ways to explore an inner foundation is to read good books. I recommend starting with *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl or *Dare to Lead* by Brene Brown.

After all these years, I have no idea what our esteemed preceptor was referring to when he told our group of would-be-doctors that his intrinsic reward far outweighed his extrinsic one, but it seems he was telling us he had found joy. I want that for me. I want that for you, too.

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