

1 **Title:** The Vigil of Medicine

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25 **Discussion Points:**

- 26 1. How has starting medical school been for you amidst a pandemic?
- 27 2. Who are your role models in medicine?
- 28 3. We are all in this struggle together.
- 29 4. What is the path of medicine like for you?
- 30 5. What inspires you to keep going on your path of medicine and combat burnout?

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1 **THE EXPERIENCE.**

2  
3 We were two fourth year medical students who poked our heads out of the tent at 2:00 am. The stars shone  
4 brightly and cascaded through our peripheral vision. We were at 12,000 feet elevation and had 2,000 more feet  
5 to climb before sunrise. We did all of the preparation we had done so many times before: boiled water for a  
6 couple packets of oatmeal, dressed in layers, checked and rechecked that we had everything. We flipped on  
7 our headlamps and began our ascent.

8  
9 Up and up we went, our breath becoming short and our legs fatiguing with the decreased oxygen. It was  
10 completely dark except for the small halo of light provided by our headlamps, so we couldn't see where we had  
11 come from or where we were going, the cliffs that we were skirting or the rise in mountains beside us. We were  
12 just walking, up and up, blindly following the path that so many had taken before.

13  
14 Every once in a while, we turned around and saw the glow of headlamps that snaked up the mountain, curving  
15 with the switchbacks. Each individual was on their own journey, up the tallest peak in the contiguous United  
16 States, but at the same time, we were doing it together, walking the same path, striving towards the same goal.

17  
18 The last quarter of a mile was the most challenging. My quadriceps burned with every step, my hands were  
19 numb, and I couldn't find my breath. The faint glow of light behind the mountains now revealed the silhouetted  
20 peak we were ascending. The view was already beautiful. I turned to my friend and asked, "Do we have to go  
21 all the way?"

22  
23 She simply said, "Yes," and we kept going.

24  
25 As we were about to summit, an older gentleman was already on his way down. He told us we wouldn't be able  
26 stay for long because the wind at 14,508 feet would cut through our layers of clothing. He was right. Once on  
27 top of the giant boulders that comprise Mt. Whitney, we spun around and took in the vast expanse of surrounding  
28 mountains and valleys before we started our descent, already preparing for the next passes we would  
29 encounter. This was Day 4 of our 21-day backpacking trip to complete the John Muir Trail, which for us totaled  
30 250 miles, ranging from Mt. Whitney in the south to Yosemite in the north. Our journey was just beginning.

31  
32 The moments when I turned around and saw the line of headlamps in the clear night as we ascended the highest  
33 peak resonated with me profoundly. It looked like a vigil up the mountain and I immediately thought of the path  
34 of medicine: we follow a trail and can't always see where we are going or how difficult it is going to be. People  
35 have been there before and more will come after, each generation of new providers following in the same  
36 footsteps but making them their own.

37  
38 I was also reminded that the journey of medicine is one fraught with challenges. Before the COVID-19 pandemic,  
39 pressure on physicians was already incredibly high, and more providers were experiencing emotional and  
40 physical exhaustion along with burnout, resulting in an estimated 400 physician suicides each year.<sup>1</sup> Among  
41 medical students, burnout has also been shown to develop over the course of training, with emotional

1 exhaustion increasing substantially after starting clinical clerkships.<sup>2</sup> Personally, there were times during my  
2 training when I did not know if I would be happy in this profession that I spent so long working towards that all  
3 of a sudden, felt very much like a trap. If I was exhausted after a day in the hospital or in the clinic as a medical  
4 student, I asked myself how I would make it through residency when my workload and responsibility would  
5 increase exponentially. I wondered if all it took was one misstep on the trail before I hurdled down the mountain  
6 towards inevitable burnout.

7  
8 Then I remember that I am not alone on this vigil. Residents and practicing physicians continue their journeys  
9 because they know medicine is not one peak or one diploma, but rather thousands of steps through many  
10 summits and valleys. I remember that despite the stress and the toll of this path, medicine is the most meaningful  
11 way that I could spend my life. I am inspired by my colleagues and mentors who have each chosen to put the  
12 lives of others in front of their own. I am inspired by my patients who, despite all of the barriers, showed up to  
13 receive care or who are pushing through some of the most difficult experiences of their lives.

14  
15 To the newer medical students, welcome. You are part of the vigil, the string of headlamps that snake up the  
16 mountain, the journey that sometimes you have to take one day, even one heavy step at a time, in the pursuit  
17 of science, empathy, and better health for our communities. Sometimes, particularly when the trail is intimidating  
18 or even isolating, it is better to focus on the small halo of light in front of you. Take comfort in knowing that many  
19 have passed before you but that it is simultaneously your own climb, your own struggle against your mind, your  
20 body, and the flood of life paths you suddenly realize you could be walking instead. Also, do not be afraid to  
21 take a moment to look behind you. Already there are more people with headlamps wishing they were in your  
22 shoes. In the 2019-2020 academic year, over 53,000 applications were submitted to United States medical  
23 schools, and just under 22,000 students matriculated.<sup>3</sup> Take a deep breath, find your shooting star, and  
24 remember that you have been training your whole life for this journey and the ascents to come. Hold onto the  
25 strength of your first steps and the reasons you started. I hope you never underestimate the importance of a  
26 nutritious breakfast, supportive shoes, and a good friend who encourages you to keep going. The climbs are  
27 worth it.

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