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Apologia pro Vita Sua Commentary on “Apologia pro Vita Sua”

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Apologia pro Vita Sua
Andrea Leal Barcelo, MD, Laura Buckley, MN, Cory Anderson, MD, Prashant Aravind, MD, and Briseida Mema, MD, MHPE

In the apologia-like spirit of this collection, the authors have borrowed this Latin expression from the eponymous title of John Henry Newman’s famous text; however, the writers are not endorsing a religious position. Like John Henry’s apologia, G.H. Hardy’s “A Mathematician’s Apolo,” and Plato’s “Apology of Socrates” these pieces compose a defense of the authors’ professional lives, not a request for forgiveness.

Dear Me
Andrea Leal Barcelo, MD

Dear 24-year-old self,

After 3 years of residency and a million calls, you’ve finally chosen your subspecialty. But, do you know what you’re signing up for? You will feel elated. After over 24 hours, and you will feel your physical limits after being awake forglobal pandemic. There will be moments when you lose sight of the light at the end of the tunnel. Some days, you will leave the hospital and life will be stained with a gray palette. Other people’s problems will seem superfluous.

Don’t be afraid. Some things will make everything worth it. You will never get used to a family thanking you, or the smile of a child who has survived a near-death. They will remind you why you chose this path.

Andrea

The Threshold
Laura Buckley, MN

When it pounded at the door, every muscle in my body tensed. Cerberus: everything I refused to feel. Anytime something triggered those emotions I ran to the door and slammed it shut with all my might. Breath tightening in my chest, I threw my weight into keeping it contained. Praying the locks would hold, while denying it was there at all. But it was always there. Sometimes Cerberus slept, providing false pretences of dormancy. But it always comes back—louder, stronger, more vicious—Hungry, demanding recognition. Now. I accept what lies beyond the threshold. I walk slowly, purposefully, towards the door. The locks still hold tight. I whisper to Cerberus. I tell him I’m here, That we are bonded for life, That we will coexist. Slowly, I undo each lock, And coax the beast into a wary truce.

Questions
Cory Anderson, MD

Will I always know what to do? Will I always have so many questions? Or should I accept my uncertainty? Isn’t it enough to have arrived where I need to be?

Prisms of View
Prashant Aravind, MD

“So, you aspire to be an intensivist? What do they do?” queried my cousin, in a tone that reminded me of my peers’ jabs a decade ago when I was choosing my career.

I gave the standardized reply I’d uttered umpteen times before: “I’ll learn about the sickest children and help them.”

Maybe I spoke the latter part of my response too softly, because her eyes narrowed and her next question came swiftly.

“You want children to be sick so that you can become a great doctor?”

Perhaps she asked out of innocence or her humane nature, her wish for everyone to be healthy. Nevertheless, her question was a jolt out of the blue. She had a totally different prism of view, one that I’d never considered, and it was not insensible. I fumbled before finally muttering, “Well, someone needs to treat the sickestd patients, right?” but I worry it didn’t reach her. She had decided who I was.

Ventilators and My Dad
Briseida Mema, MD, MHPE

During one of our dinner conversations, I realized that my dad thought the push of a button on a ventilator was all it took for a patient to live.

His expression remained perplexed after my lengthy, indignant explanation about the importance of the clinician’s participation, so I tried another analogy. My dad wanted me to follow in his professional footsteps and become a writer. He used to read poems to me in bed—some more sophisticated than my childhood brain could grasp—but I enjoyed their rhyme. One day, he asked me to write a poem. Obediently, I started by targeting the one element of the poem that I understood: the rhyme. I found four rhyming words and inserted them at the end of each sentence ending with my rhyming words, and I had my poem.

I proudly showed my dad my “masterpiece.” I still remember the look on his face: total disappointment! He explained to me then that there is more to writing a poem than finding four rhyming words. There is also the feeling, the meaning, the rhythm and still more.

In a time when the public is trying to understand what is happening in healthcare and some appreciate the “rhyme,” we need to take care to explain to them the rhythm, the feelings, and the meaning of our work.
Commentary on “Apologia pro Vita Sua”

I am human; I think nothing human is alien to me.¹

Every day, critical care clinicians bear witness to human experiences that are at once universal and exceptional. As they attend to individual patients, they actively participate in the cycles of grief, joy, sickness, and recovery that all humans encounter between the boundaries of birth and death. Critical care clinicians occupy privileged positions in the lives of others, thereby developing a unique understanding of the complex factors informing how the paths of their patients and fellow practitioners unfold.

This collection is grounded in the theme of examining formative experiences in each of the author’s professional path to clinician. “Profession” stems from the Latin professio, “I profess,” or to make a significant public declaration. Choosing to pursue clinical work is itself a formative public declaration for and about one’s identity, and from this starting line of personal choice, diverse professional journeys take shape within the ecosystem of medicine. All 5 of the works are excerpts from larger self-reflections, which were, in turn, sculpted from stories, light and heavy hearted, shared by the writers over the course of several evening discussions as part of a medical humanities elective. The writers address the challenge, but also the meaning, fulfillment, and recompense, of their profession. This body of work thus becomes an Apologia Pro Vita Sua, a written defense for their belief in their vocations, an explanation for having chosen their arduous courses.

At a time when burnout is a pressing systemic issue among health care professionals,² prescient related topics such as handling difficult emotions, overcoming imposter syndrome, and reaching professional fulfillment continually rise to the surface.
Here, clinician-authors comment on the wide spectrum of emotional situations they must be prepared to deal with at work, experiences echoed by their colleagues. In “Dear Me” and in “The Threshold,” Andrea Leal Barcelo and Laura Buckley investigate the steep emotional demands of their labor and arrive at wise, encouraging conclusions: Barcelo acknowledges medicine’s abundant emotional rewards, and Buckley accepts the perennial presence of difficult emotions.

Difficult emotions can also emerge from clinicians’ tendency to ask difficult questions about others and about themselves. Self-questioning is a valuable asset in the pursuit of self-improvement, but taken too far, it can also manifest in the phenomenon of imposter syndrome, to which health professionals are uniquely vulnerable because of their public roles as experts tasked with significant responsibilities in safeguarding the lives of others. Though insecurities can persist even in later stages of a clinician’s career, contemporary initiatives encourage sharing feelings of imposter syndrome in order to safely explore and understand them. As an alternative to focusing solely on gaps in their ability, clinicians can benefit from recognizing improvement and mastery over things they previously found challenging. “Questions” by Cory Anderson captures the experience of weighing the delicate balance of uncertainty and confidence in one’s abilities; the speaker in the poem continues to ask questions but also learns to appreciate his skills has acquired.

Loved ones, too, may ask tough questions about a physician’s professional choices. These questions can motivate self-reflection, which can strengthen the responder’s resolve by reminding them of the goals and ideals that drew them at the outset of their career; however, such questions can cause self-doubt and reinforce the disconnect
between those in the field and those outside of it. “Prisms of View” by Prashant Aravind recollect a peer’s naive assumptions about the protagonist’s values based on his chosen vocation. In continuing to pursuing a career as an “intensivist,” the protagonist clearly chooses to hold onto his own assessment of the ideals that have guided him on his professional trajectory; still, the narrator leaves the conversation troubled, illustrating how painful misunderstandings between loved ones can remain unresolved. Finally, in my (B.M.’s) short story, “Ventilators and My Dad,” the narrator and her father have a conversation that not only sparks a profound teaching moment between a specialist and a non-specialist but also gives voice to the demanding yet vital task of communicating clearly to promote understanding of health and health care.

Ultimately, the writers all demonstrate how professional fulfilment can be a potent antidote to burnout and a meaningful answer to the question of why medical professionals continue to work in such a stressful field. In fact, fulfillment may be a more sustained state than burnout for critical care clinicians. When clinicians understand why they chose to become medical professionals and how their work contributes to the lives of others, they are more likely to find professional and personal fulfilment, which can pull them through the rigor of providing contemporary health care. Sometimes, a pause is necessary for physicians to reflect and write about their experiences, a pause helps remind them how far they have come and how much they have learned in their high-stakes, emotionally and physically demanding workplace where their actions can irrevocably change their lives and the lives of others. These works, the challenges and successes of an increasingly demanding profession, and the rewards of forging connections across fields and between people, honor this group of writer-clinicians.
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1. Afer, Publius Terentius (or Terence). Heauton Timorumenos [The Self Tormenter]. 163 BCE.


