



Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma
Advancing Science, Fostering Relationships, and Building Careers

2018 Oriens Resident Winning Essay
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Do not go gentle into that good night, old age should burn and rave at close of day; rage, rage against the dying of the light. – Dylan Thomas

This poem evoked a carnival of emotions in me the first time I read it; feelings of loss and exhaustion with a glimmer of hope. The poem speaks specifically to a father's impending blindness, and generally to death approaching each of us steadily and unceasingly. But more than that, it is a battle cry for the futile. It implores us to fight the unwinnable fight, with the fight itself necessarily its own reward. It is at this crossing of futility and hope, found so commonly in the trauma bay, that I hear Thomas' words speak most poignantly and find my purpose.

I was not born to be a doctor, much less a surgeon. I do not come from a family of physicians. As a child, I cannot claim to have been an above average student. I was not fascinated with biology, anatomy or biochemistry. I never had a moment of epiphany or the intercession of providence determine my future. Mine is not a story of certainty or destiny, but of a curious uncertainty innate to my constitution. Seeking answers as a young person I was fortunate to travel outside of my community, finding evidence of the very worst and very best of humanity. The most impactful stories came from people whose grandest thrusts were aimed at the most futile of causes: A teenage boy in Honduras risking his life by declining to act as a drug mule in one of the busiest drug corridors in the world; a male bystander caught in a riot in Oaxaca, Mexico, risking assault by the mob to plead for the life of a beaten stranger; a foster mother in north Philadelphia accepting her 30th foster child despite seeing the neighborhood around her succumb to violence and crime; a refugee in Thailand recently escaped from unlawful imprisonment in Myanmar who refused to sign a false confession despite weeks of barbaric torture; a man in Haiti working tirelessly to run a medical clinic for his neighbors despite living in unimaginable squalor himself.

The moments that stayed with me, changed me, and set me on my current path all shared this common theme: individual people fighting small battles in wars they could not hope to win. They did not fight these battles for fortune or glory. They fought these battles for the hope that their choices would bring about, in some small way, greater beauty, clearer truth, and stronger love. I found that this strange, senseless hope is what makes us human and unique among all other life on Earth. This hope, I believe, is the light which Thomas speaks of in his poem.

The trauma surgeon fights the most futile battle of all: the battle of life over death. Death always wins out in the end. We cut, ligate, patch, sew, reconstruct, scratch and claw to give the strangers in front of us a few more precious seconds of life, and if we do our jobs well, and if luck is on our side, a few more years of life. But even years are the blink of an eye in the cosmic tale, a whisper in the blare of time. Life, that which we nominally fight for, will inevitably end for each of our patients. So why choose this taxing profession? The answer lies in examining what life truly is. Life is not the sum of the factors which we as surgeons can control and whose cessation we use to define death: a beating heart, ventilated lungs, perfused tissue, a functioning brain. Life is not an acid-base status or an INR. But neither is life, once preserved by medical parameters, a guarantee of anything. Life is a chance. Life is a hope; the hope that we each may find what I must believe we all seek: freedom, beauty, truth, and love. At its core, the job of the trauma surgeon is to fight for the same hope that informed the nobility of the people who have changed my life.

I choose to be a trauma and acute care surgeon so that I may fight for that hope, the same seemingly senseless hope that defines our humanity, in moments when it has been so suddenly and violently extinguished for my patients. I choose this career so that I may also share in the nobility of the people I have admired most in my adult life.