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Waiting for Godot

Words whispered to me in the quiet of confidence:

"I've been repeatedly misgendered. There's nowhere to indicate my preferred pronouns to our administration. I feel this place is a hostile learning environment."

"I have to repeatedly ask for my accommodations. I have to repeatedly explain my health status and why I have decided not to undergo intensive surgery right now to 'fix myself'."

"I have had to independently orchestrate an elaborate system of childcare to cover the three times of day I am expected to be on the wards."

"I am a patient. I have been hospitalized during medical school for wanting to kill myself."

"I am afraid of being stopped by the police. I worry about waking up to the shooting of my sisters and brothers on TV."

"I can't breathe. I want to demonstrate my anger with protests, with change."

“I am tired. I need to take online classes, research months, and time off. My passion for patient care is not strong enough to outweigh the dread of this place.”

Things lectured to me in our academic halls:

“Suck it up”, said the director of our Internal Medicine rotation at Medical Education Grand Rounds. “That’s my viewpoint on wellness.”

“Those protests are damaging to your reputation”, said the anesthesia attending. “You should be careful of having such photos of yourself.”

“Don’t wear your Black Lives Matter Pin”, said the Human Resources Department. “Don’t wear your LGBTQ Pride Pins. Too political, we don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable.”

“Mandatory group sessions would also make me want to kill myself”, said the director of our Internal Medicine rotation at Medical Education Grand Rounds.

“An applicant asked me about the mental health support for our trainees”, complained the psychiatry Program Director. “I think twice about an applicant who asks me that kind of thing.”

“Women in medicine should get married to a man who makes money”, said the Chair of the Department of Medicine. “This way you can spend more time at home and relieve your guilt of being a career woman.”

“It pains me to think of students out there suffering”, said the Chair of the Curriculum Committee. “It pains me to think we don’t know about it.”

Things we have said in response:

“But, this learning climate is hurting us. The traditions of medicine are capitalist, heterosexist, patriarchal, and racist. This culture assertively promotes obedience to authority, conservatism, and assimilation. We see our patients and our hearts being burdened by these oppressions. Is that not suffering?”

Wait. Said the Vice Dean. Wait for when the curriculum is changing.

Wait. Said the Advisory Dean. Wait until you have completed your studies.

Wait. Said the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs. Wait until you are really a doctor.

Wait. Said the Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs. Wait until you are an attending with authority. Wait. They said.

Wait.

For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never."

Things said in a group debriefing session:

“I can learn to wait. I will learn to justify the time between now and then, between now and that time when I might have the power to make a difference.”

Staring at my residency application, I said:

Maybe medicine isn't the place for me. It has placed a hundred ton anvil on my bursting soul. I am losing the love of learning, the love of service. I am losing the ability to care for our communities because in this ivory tower, I am transforming myself out of belonging. I am no longer the brother or sister of patients, I am the overseer and auctioneer of health. I must learn "cultural competency" because I am systematically forgetting my own. I must re-learn to practice empathy because my shameful emotional vulnerability is hidden deep within. I am losing the ability to honor the humanity in others because I am killing it within myself.

And yet,

I have touched humans Who Still Rise.

I have cried with humans who have invited me to heal within their grief

I have read Roxane Gay write brokenly about working to love her abused body and passionate soul. I have seen Angela Davis tell her stories of collectives, feminism, and activism.

I have heard Bryan Stevenson call to keep the drums beating for justice. I have visited the grave of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and he said to me:

We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending

national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

On September 15, 2017, I submitted my residency application. For I deserve better.

My classmates deserve better. Our communities deserve better.

We all deserve the solid rock of human dignity. Now.