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**Balancing the Weight: A Dialogue Between Medicine and Humanity**

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***Humanity***: *Do you ever wonder, Medicine, how they manage it? How do they carry the weight of you and still find room for themselves?*

My first introduction to medicine began as I followed my father down the corridor, inhaling the faint fragrance of bleach. The pictures on the walls were benign prints of uplifting scenes. Above the secured doors hung a faded sign: Memory Care Unit. The volunteer director ushered my father and me to a dining room, seating us next to “Joann.” She whispered a greeting, then focused on dinner. I tried to strike up a conversation but was met with blank stares. I glanced at my dad and noted the types of questions he asked the quiet woman.

Over the course of the hour, I noticed how significant details in her stories shifted. After dinner, we walked back to her room with her nurse, as Joann wanted to introduce me to her husband. When we arrived, my heart sank. Her room was empty. I held back tears as I looked into the eyes of the confounded woman. Her husband was nowhere to be found, and I didn’t need to look at my dad to understand the harsh reality.

We all have moments that move us—moments that replace our innocent view of the world with a deeper understanding of ourselves and others. Joann unintentionally taught me the universal language of empathy. It was this experience with medicine that shifted my understanding, not only of myself but how I saw the world. I couldn’t help Joann regain her identity, but I could carry forward the profound impact she made on me, creating change that extends beyond my lifetime.

***Medicine***: *I don’t know, Humanity. I demand so much—long hours, endless responsibilities, life-or-death decisions. Sometimes, I fear I take too much from them.*

Years later, I found myself once again surrounded by the beeping of machines, sterile hospital walls, and the constant demands of patient care. This time, my family was grappling with their own loss in the NICU—navigating the passing of Audrey.

Amid the quiet hum of ventilators and the careful discussions between care teams and parents, humanity persisted. It urged integration—not separation—of work and life, in a way that nurtures patients, families, and caregivers alike.

Audrey’s healthcare team went beyond clinical care, becoming a pillar of support. I began to see that physicians hold the distinct role of mediating between medical expertise and the preservation of human values, dignity, and connection.

***Humanity****: But surely they resent you, Medicine, for taking so much?*

***Medicine****: Some might. But I’ve seen others lean into their why. When they remember why they chose me, resentment turns to purpose.*

Purpose is the foundation of work-life integration. It’s not about “having it all,” as the myth so often suggests. It’s about deciding what matters most and letting that guide you.

For me, clarity came when I became Executive Director of the Lunar Doula Collective, a nonprofit providing bereavement support for reproductive loss. In this role, I’ve sat with families in their grief. I’ve heard stories of isolation, cultural stigma, and unacknowledged pain. I’ve learned that my humanity, the ability to hold space for others and to listen without judgment, is as essential as any skill I will gain as a physician. This work is emotionally taxing, but it also grounds me. It reminds me that work-life integration is not just a strategy but a necessity for survival in a field as demanding as medicine.

***Medicine****: Tell me, Humanity, what does integration look like?*

***Humanity****: It looks like remembering your why. It looks like finding purpose in the hard days and joy in the small moments. And it looks like building a life that honors both work and self.*

Medicine expects much. Women physicians face unique obstacles: pay disparities, the invisible burden of proving their worth in male-dominated fields, and for those with families, the unsaid expectation to excel as both a physician and caregiver. To say it is exhausting does not do it justice.

When considering work-life integration (WLI), I don’t imagine drawing hard lines between work and personal life. Instead, I imagine creating harmony—letting one sphere inform and enrich the other. But how do we achieve that harmony, especially as women in a field that so often demands more than it gives?

Attempting to achieve this harmony is not about perfection, but more so about adaptability. We must give ourselves permission to prioritize different aspects of life at different times, embracing the ebb and flow rather than striving for an impossible equilibrium.

It would be naive to think that achieving this balance will not come without challenges—challenges that evolve through the seasons of life. As women, we often bear the weight of societal expectations: to excel professionally while also being the ones who “hold it all together.” The medical field compounds these pressures. Women are often left to navigate an unspoken choice: to lean into their careers at the expense of personal lives or step back, risking professional stagnation.

I could share personal strategies to navigate work-life integration, but no individual effort can fully address the issue without systemic change. Mentorship, institutional support, setting boundaries that respect our patients and ourselves, and fostering a strong community are essential reminders that we don’t have to face these challenges alone.

When I’ve asked physicians about “work-life balance,” their responses are often tinged with humor or disbelief. Many question why I’d even bring it up, given the competitive nature of medicine and the reality that high-achieving women often feel forced to choose between stepping up or stepping back. Historically, women have had little room to find true harmony in this field, yet I remain hopeful for a future where this balance is not only possible but encouraged.

The balance between work and life is not easy, but it is worth striving for. When we allow ourselves to live fully in both spheres, we don’t just avoid becoming prisoners of our careers—we find freedom in the integration.