Linda Brodsky Memorial Journal

**Coming Home to Ourselves**

*Vivian Kim*

As young girls, we are often taught to consider the needs of others. Quickly, we stop needing the reminder. Growing up, every decision I made became a cost-benefit analysis of possible effects on my family, friends, superiors, neighbors, finances, the environment, and society at large, whether I was choosing a career path or a snack at the grocery store. I internalized the voices of my loved ones – or what I imagined they would say – as well as societal expectations; the weight of cultural norms, diet culture, racism, sexism, and a general feeling of guilt and shame permeated my actions. It took years before the only voice I realized was missing from my decision-making was my own.

To encounter oneself without shame is a radical challenge for many women. Simply asking the questions “Who am I?” and “What do I want?” are wildly uncomfortable in a society that often benefits from one not knowing the answers.

However, I believe that work-life integration, and happiness and satisfaction in general, depend on knowing oneself without shame. In doing this, I will be better equipped to understand and take ownership of my own needs; I can fill my own cup with what I truly want rather than what I feel my desires should be. Further, knowing myself will allow me to identify and practice within my values. Working in an imperfect healthcare system where difficult choices often have to be made, I feel I will be able to make the most of both my career and personal life if they are consistent with my values.

An accessible first step I hope to utilize in the everlasting journey to coming home to myself is simply slowing down. So often, when women are asked to take on a responsibility or obligation, they accept without stopping to consider if it makes sense for them. Many have internalized a feeling of innate responsibility for others at the expense of caring for themselves. Whether we want a given responsibility or whether we have the time and capacity for it become irrelevant. However, in my own life, when receiving yet another request, I am hopeful that a simple deep breath – to parse through the noise of obligation and into the reality of my desires and bandwidth –will allow me to be honest with both myself and those around me.

By no means does shedding the excess weight of responsibility mean neglecting one’s loved ones, patients, or greater obligation to society, though I still fall victim to this myth. I have often felt that saying no to something meant I was uncaring or unmotivated or, worse, that I was causing harm to others. This feeling, coined “Human Giver Syndrome,” refers to the idea that certain groups, especially women, feel that their existence depends solely on their utility to others. In Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle by Emily and Amelia Nagoski, the authors suggest that the solution to Human Giver Syndrome is not to become a freely uncaring person, but to create systemic change that motivates all of us – of all genders, races, ages, and others demographics – to give in ways that do not deplete ourselves. This systemic change will require a cultural shift of gender responsibilities in the home and workplace, coupled with a genuine investment by institutions in equitable change. Initiatives such as balanced parental leave for parents of all genders and more affordable national childcare are just two examples, but there are infinitely more. I look forward to using my career to fight for policy that supports this balance and equity.

 I am proud of my desire to be a good sister, friend, daughter and doctor to those around me. I do not aspire to lose that. In fact, I hope that in caring more thoughtfully about myself, I will be better in all of these roles. As I enter my medical residency in psychiatry, I know I will face immense challenges related to time, relationships, money, burnout, and the general feeling that I can always be doing more. From speaking to my fellow classmates, I know I am not the only one. However, as we support higher-level change, I trust us to maintain community with one another and our loved ones. Vulnerability is a strength, something I am reminded of every time a patient shares a difficult story with me or when a friend comes to me with a concern. In being honest with ourselves and others, my hope for myself and the women around me is that we can learn to know ourselves a little more each day. I trust that there will come a day when, considering a decision, I will hear my own voice crystal clear. “There you are,” I’ll say. “I’ve been looking for you.” MD to save a life. Our humanity is our only expertise.

**Biography**



Vivian (she/her) is a fourth-year medical student at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, NY. She completed her undergraduate degrees in Economics and Spanish at Tufts University, where she developed interests in the systems surrounding health. She is passionate about patient-centered health systems research and understanding social determinants of health. She is currently applying for residency in psychiatry, with ultimate plans to become a bilingual child and adolescent psychiatrist. In her free time, she enjoys reading, paint-bynumbers, and long walks with her friends.