

The Longest Journey

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wan·der·lust
'wändər,ləst/
noun

1. a strong desire to travel.

“a man consumed by wanderlust”

There are people who like to travel, and then there are the “wanderlusters.” Their love of travel can appear compulsive, even obsessive. They find any excuse to flee the country and maximize vacation and work trips to spend more time away from home. They are always looking forward to their next destination and take pride in getting off the beaten track.

I am one of those people.

I travel to see beautiful things. Mountains, volcanoes, wooded forests, streams and lakes, craters and steaming geysers. I like to look up and see 100 feet of ocean between me and the air I breathe. Or look down into the mouth of a steaming volcano. I will wake up at 2 am and hike myself into a delirium just to see sunrise at a 14,000 foot summit. The first beams of light cut through the mist and bathe the surrounding mountains in gold. It will take your breath away and make you want to see the other worlds within our world.

I travel for new experiences. Daily routines are numbing, even when they require engagement. Forfeiting my routines is when I feel the most – fear, triumph, pain, joy, awkwardness, inspiration, disgust, energy, exhaustion. Travel necessitates getting away from the familiar and infuses a bit of adrenaline into even simple tasks. Whether it is attempting to eat with your right hand (my non-dominant hand) in front of your Indian host family, learning how to pole a mokoro boat in Botswana, or just getting lost and finding yourself, each new experience provides you with a book mark in the story of your life. More book marks, a thicker book.

I travel for people. I'll never forget the Burmese woman who took my hand and led me through her village to a large, adorned building in the village center. Inside, she sat me down on my knees at a wooden table and signaled that I was to eat. I proceeded to eat 7 courses of delicious, unidentified Burmese food surrounded by monks, and she wouldn't let me pay or donate. I'll never forget the trilingual gentleman who took me on a walking tour of his township in South Africa. Despite the tragedies of apartheid, I was welcome, and the tour was part of a mass effort for education, not separation. I will always be grateful for the French woman who found me stranded in the purgatory of the Bolivian airport. I couldn't get back on the plane and I couldn't exit the building without paying for my visa. I had no cash and no working credit cards, and she slapped down 100 dollars for me without

a second thought. She told me to simply pay it forward. Connecting with people from around the world and learning about how they live is humbling. I am reminded that my way of living and thinking is not the only way, it might not even be a good way. It is other people that give meaning to the things that we do. If I was alone on this Earth – why bother building or creating?

When people ask about my travels and career plans, they give me a look of pity when I say I am going into medicine. They say that I will have no time to travel and my life will be in a hospital. It's true. In the next decade, a vast amount of my time is going to be spent in the wards, but I am going to be traveling more than I have in my life. *My love of travel is part of why I am becoming a doctor.*

There is so much beauty to be found in medicine. How gorgeous does a pregnant woman look, with her rosy cheeks and shiny hair? Or the movement of a baby's lips as they take their first gasp of air? How beautiful is the mind, to summate all the clues from a patient to determine what is wrong and what needs to be done to fix it? How magnificent is human work ethic, to spend thousands of hours in a lab to create the perfect protein to fall into the perfect place in a long cascade of reactions to cure someone's immune disease or treat their cancer? What about the perfection of a surgeon's removal of a tumor, a clean x-ray, and the disappearing contours of a scar? The partner's hand that glides over the sheets to grasp their lover's palm in staunch unity – that is beauty.

Medicine is a world of firsts. Already, I have asked a stranger the most intimate questions, watched the creation of life in a Petri dish, and held the hand of someone who just needed to be heard. I have taken a bone saw to the sternum of a willfully donated body, held a human heart, and informed a patient that they have beaten their immune disease into remission. I'm not ready for what is to come, but I know I must prepare to give someone a lethal diagnosis, see life leave a face, give birth to an infant, and make decisions knowing that the life of that person – or an entire community – will be

forever changed. I will feel the most intense sadness, pride, and happiness of my life. These experiences hold immense responsibility, but they cannot be had any other way.

Medicine is all about people. No matter what the insurance company wants or what the hospital says, a doctor is there for their patient. Each appointment is the opportunity to meet someone new, connect with them, listen to them, and hopefully help them. There are many jobs that involve talking to people every day or helping others in some way, but the doctor-patient relationship is unique. It is a relationship of mutual give and take. The patient needs help, the physician needs information. The patient needs compassion and understanding, the physician needs trust. Out of this relationship, a bond of mutual respect is forged, and this has healing power in itself.

Wanderlust might not be so much an obsession with escaping as it is an appreciation for the people and beauty around us. Just as you do not need to be a doctor to help others, you do not need to leave the country to open your eyes and your heart. Physician or not, we can all use a bit of wanderlust.

