

dear residents

The Nature of Work

September 10, 2023

Dear Residents,

The heat spell may be over – fingers crossed. Scoring an outdoor table at the Katy Trail Ice House will be the new goal.

I often reflect on the nature of work, especially as I think through how to best construct your time here and give you enough moments of slowness to just reflect and savor. And I should plan the same for myself. Unplugging is something I am seemingly incapable of – I am barely away from my phone – with a few exceptions like the shower and sometimes a deliberate effort to not sleep with the phone next to me. My unspoken self-expectation is that I will always be on the job.

I began my life in a romantic age of sorts – Pakistan in the 1960's and 70's – an unhurried post-colonial time. Even television did not arrive until the late 1960's and broadcasts were only for a few hours in the evenings. Most of my childhood connections to the outside world was through the radio – listening to cricket games or to music while taking a nap after school – one could catch Radio Australia on the shortwave radio. There was no personal computer. I hadn't seen one until I came to the US in 1988.

The romantic age ended a while ago and we are now squarely in the modern age with its three main forces: busyness, competition, and comparison. Work can always reach you, whether you are at work or not, competition fuels the need to be “productive” and comparison is perpetually in our face – we know a lot about the lives of others.

There is something different about our work, though. This distinction may be emanating from the complex intertwining of discovery and labor. As we work through the puzzles our patients present, we anticipate the joy of discovering the answer. The trouble is that five such patients in a day is fun, while 15 would be a slog. You can see it all or see it well. This remains the number one challenge for any residency program – how many patients should be assigned to you, what role does complexity and acuity play, what productivity forces are at play. When challenge and ability are well matched, one enters a state of flow – you are in the zone, tasks feel effortless, time passes easily.

As you start your day, I expect that you feel the tensions of the work ahead of you and anticipate the exhaustion of a call day. Mixed in there is the delight in serving those who really need you and having the expertise and the tools to solve their problems. I am exceptionally grateful for the efforts you make to do each day's work exceptionally well.

Romanticism and Modernism would be an incompatible union in most situations – and while modernism drives your day, please do slow down when you can to reflect on what you are learning. It need not be a publishable case report – but write down something about what you experienced, what you learned (and what you need to learn) and how you contributed. The days are about to become more pleasant – your eyes deserve to look up at the blue sky and your face could enjoy the cool breeze (yes, there is such a thing!)



St. Kitts and Nevis

Dino Kazi