Editorial

Humanism and Interventional Radiology

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How often have you as an individual wished that you could be more of “something”? It seems that we live our lives trying to fill in the gaps of what we consider our own personhood — “I need to be better at (fill in here)” ; “I need to be more balanced in (this or that) way” ; “I’ll never reach (whatever) goal without developing (blank) skill set,” etc. It seems that we physicians are particularly wired that way, and I’m not sure why. Perhaps it’s that most of us are Type A-plus personality types, or perhaps it is a sense of competitiveness that we were either born with or that we have developed over our prolonged period of training. I’m not certain really what it is, but I can say for certain that nearly every other physician I know strives for the same thing—self-improvement.

While on one hand I can honestly say that physicians as a group—and I would contend IRs in particular—are very interesting people with whom to hang out, I must admit that some of us can be a little more difficult to have a conversation with. Additionally, although we as physicians have the reputation for arrogance, I would actually suggest that most I find physicians to be very approachable and interesting people. I wrote “interesting,” not “balanced,” for a reason. There are some practicing physicians I know who are exceptional scientists, some who are board-certified in multiple specialties, some who have a well-developed right side of their brain—but rarely do I see someone in our field who possesses all of these skill sets.

I just had a scheduled appointment with an industry representative. Not to be demeaning, but meeting someone from industry for the first time on a Friday afternoon can sometimes lead to a, shall I say, desire to be anywhere but here. The only worse thing I can imagine, to be frank, would be to find myself in *their* shoes rather than mine (“Sure, Dr. Smith, I don’t mind waiting for another four hours ... who wants to celebrate their child’s birthday anyway.”). What was intended to be a meet and greet turned into a very thought-provoking conversation. Understanding that I met her for all of 45 minutes, I thought I would put some thoughts on paper.

Veronica Prieto Ventura, MD, is currently the Medical Science Liaison for Guerbet. From what I could glean from

our conversation, she was a practicing radiologist in Venezuela who went to the Canary Islands for further training in IR, then went to LSU in New Orleans to learn English and work in a basic science laboratory, then went to Hopkins to work on more basic science before going to UCLA for the same reason, then went to Texas somewhere for I don’t remember what, then to Emory for basic science research, and now has transitioned to her medical position within industry. I have probably missed a couple of stops along the way, but while trying to digest her life course (I should have been taking notes, plus she’s a damn fast talker) she threw in something about being a painter in Europe. Given the fact that she looks approximately 30 years old, I’m not sure how she has accomplished all of this. And, by the way, there was no pretense associated with this information, and in fact this conversation nearly didn’t occur at all. It was only after I asked the simple question, “What is your background?” that all of this information came to the forefront. (There probably is an ancillary lesson to be learned in that last sentence, but I digress.)

As impressive as her path has been, and what really got me thinking, was what followed. During our conversation, this accomplished basic science/physician (think of the top scientists in our field, and she has worked with them) used words such as “humanity,” “humility,” and other such terms innumerable times. As far as I can tell, she hasn’t primarily performed procedures on patients in several years, yet during this conversation she still referred to them as “our patients.” Most importantly, she used these terms *completely unapologetically*. Have you ever run into this in medicine, where in speaking with another physician there is some sense of sheepishness associated with using such gentle terms? I’m not sure why this has to be. We all (presumably) entered the field of medicine as humanists first, scientists second. Is it through our training that we lose this sense of humanism and become black and white thinkers? Is it “maturity”? Is it something else, and most importantly, can you tell me how to get it back?

There are many issues front and center in our field right now. MACRA has taken on a life of its own, changes to our training programs are exciting but full of uncertainty with how best to implement these changes, competition abounds in clinical

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practice, etc. And this doesn't even touch on the day-to-day worries that are ubiquitous. I can't help but think that sometimes taking a step back, or even a step out for a period of time, gives us a sense of perspective that sometimes we can't just get from the inside. I believe that the majority of us have this within ourselves, to get in touch (or back in touch) with a side of ourselves that is completely outside of medicine. Did you know that Matt Johnson went to Julliard to play cello? Or that Al Nemcek was a Stanford gymnast who now plays harmonica every chance he gets? How

about that Brian Funaki essentially rebuilt his whole house, Riad Salem speaks a gazillion languages, or Scott Goodwin rowed for UCLA? These individuals are the *crème de la crème* of our field as physicians and scientists, but can it be that pursuing these other aspects of themselves not only makes them more human, but makes them better physicians and scientists? If so, I might suggest that we all allow ourselves to take some time away from "all this," with the understanding that "all this" is generally necessary to accomplishing "all that."