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By my second year of residency, I embodied many of the pithy wisdoms shared across urologic training programs. “The enemy of good is better”? My notes stopped resembling essays about our patients with perfect punctuation; they became clear, direct--and sometimes obfuscated gerunds. “Eat when you can, sleep when you can”? This was a daily mantra. I found secret lunch spots (dusty, abandoned windowsills) and makeshift “futons” (using some imagination). An unofficial pearl for dinner scheduling? “Expect defeat. Invest in the frozen food section.”

Those idioms allowed me to adjust my daily actions, to change my word choice in a note, where I hid my lunch, and notions of what constitutes a bed. It was harder to find aphorisms that modified my mind. My second year, I developed bad habits. I rushed through my tasks, frazzled about what I had left to do. I hurried patient conversations, was rigid in my diagnoses, and easily frustrated. Most of all, I was focused almost entirely on myself at work: my tasks, my needs, my feelings.

I grew up in a religious household, where the Torah (five books of Moses) and Talmud (rabbinical writings) were reliably successful in providing guidance. If the Talmud is a wealth of Jewish law, it is equally an impressive compilation of 3rd-6th century maxims. A particularly poignant quote caught my attention: “Who is honored? He who honors others.”

I repeated that during afternoon rounds when I spoke to patients. I couldn’t slow down entirely, but trying to honor their needs helped me focus on their cravings for emotional companionship through the hospital’s unknowns. I will probably never lose my impatience at patients who construct tales of their HPIs, but I have softened my internal response. I remind myself that they are alone, and they are sick, and I can help by simply listening. “Honoring others” means giving everyone the benefit of the doubt. I try to refrain from allowing my instinctive frustration in response to a day’s mishaps, when I’m tired and hungry, to have me criticize someone else.

Urology remains one of a handful of professions that asks devotees to continually choose between comfort or success, relationships or work, sleep or devotion. The aphorisms we choose can help us navigate many daily struggles: is there a comfortable bed in this hospital? (no), am I going to be home for dinner? (doubtful), will I ever be able to write a consult note in under 45 minutes? (believe it!). Yet so much of our mental and physical energy is spent on basic physical necessities and completing our tasks, that I sometimes need a reminder to look outside of my immediate concerns.

Honoring others reminds me that the hospital is a microcosm of society, not a silo. Fear, anxiety, perfectionism and struggle are universal human experiences that I, my co-residents, my patients, and every individual walking through our main entrance faces. I’m trying to honor the ubiquity of our shared emotions by focusing outward. It’s not perfect, but it’s a start.