

# Weekend Sabbatical

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As a fourth-year medical student in her research months, I finally had time to pursue my desire to learn Spanish. Three mornings a week, I crept into the back corner of a basement classroom filled with sleepy 18-year-olds who had not fulfilled their language requirement. One Wednesday, the freshman in front of me turned past the hood of his logoed sweatshirt to ask this pivotal question: On Friday's quiz, did I think we would need to know the verbs' meanings, or only how to conjugate them? In the same gentle, regretful voice used for admitting a procedure will be painful, I suggested we probably needed to know the meanings. After a long pause, he released a frustrated sigh and muttered, "You're so hardcore."

He was not wrong. Whether by training or selection bias, I, like many physicians, am a hardcore learner. So, I threw myself into that course with vigor, teaching myself subjunctive and conditional verb tenses from the textbook charts. Though I inadvertently erased 8 years of French education, I became fluent in Spanish. In the intervening 27 years, I have immersed myself in other learning adventures. Many of my initial forays were limited to projects I could do on borrowed time—after my children were asleep or while watching a movie together. They also often had specific benefit for my children, which I suspect made me feel these activities were more altruistic than selfish. I spent many evenings from 8 to 10 in the basement, hand shingling 2 dollhouses for my daughters. I learned to needlepoint and made each of my 3 children a tooth fairy pillow and hangings for their rooms. When I had only one child left at home, we spent a week at a bread-baking intensive together in Vermont. Although my children reaped the products of my work, the process—those cool, quiet nights painting dollhouse shutters—was for me to accomplish something straightforward, to create, and to complete a task.

Not every endeavor was enjoyable or lasted, like the container garden which seemed like a great idea. In spite of its lovely produce, and in part because gardens do not wait for your free time and must be attended when the harvest is ready, it ended—abandoned and rotting in the front yard. During the summers, the demands of my family made intensive

engagement in a long-term project impossible. Instead, we had more limited family projects: painting signs leading to my parents' beach house, tie-dye weekends, or endless projects involving glueing shells to wooden frames and boxes. My conviction as a pediatrician about the importance of praising effort and creativity had to vanquish my perfectionist tendencies. Our slightly wonky work products are still displayed years later; looking at them, I hope my children see the value of creativity and manual production.

This year, with all my children away at college, I enrolled in a 200-hour yoga teacher training course. Why, my husband wondered. I had no intention of giving up medicine to teach yoga full-time. In part, my interest in treating anxiety and depression drove my curiosity about whether yoga could play a role in that. As a long-time practitioner of yoga, teacher training seemed intriguing. The truth is, I was eager to (intensively) learn something new.

Yoga teacher training has reminded me that learning is fundamental to teaching. University sabbaticals honor a concept medicine forgets: to teach enthusiastically, one must learn enthusiastically. By encouraging professors to spend time learning something new every 7 years, universities give faculty a chance to revisit the learning process and become excited about novel ideas. This energy and perspective imbue prior activities, even teaching the same old courses, with a revitalized spirit.

Given the obligations of patient care, sabbaticals are unrealistic in clinical practice. Yet yoga teacher training, or my prior learning excursions, serve as weekend sabbaticals. These experiences allow investigation in a low-risk environment where failure means only a tiny (literal) stumble without impacting patients or institutions. As I absorb new information, I rediscover how much I love to learn. That passion inspires increased investment in teaching and interest in innovation.

Many gifted (and happy) physicians I know have constructed such sabbaticals or learning playgrounds outside medicine: a pediatrician's thriving garden, a pulmonologist's garage band, or a radiologist's basement wood shop. Our tendency to be hardcore learners lends these activities a specific intensity: yoga teacher training rather than yoga classes, or an elaborate wooden sculpture in the local museum instead of a keepsake box on the dresser. More than hobbies, these are a space for exploration, learning,

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collaboration, and creativity. These experiences give those of us who are accustomed to being experts the chance to explore deeply with less attachment to outcome, though I suspect our egos often push us toward the same perfection we demand in medicine.

It is no coincidence that these endeavors all involve using our hands. Today, physicians spend more time on electronic medical records than examining patients. In contrast to this environment, sabbatical learning removes us from our computer screens and tethers us to the physical world—the world of the body, of suffering, of the medicine we thought we would practice. This connection is a vital reminder of the link between our minds and the somatic domain.

Occasionally, the practical skills of our sabbaticals carry over into our professional lives. My yoga learning has changed my understanding of injury prevention and functional anatomy. My radiologist friend's woodworking may reinforce the dexterity imperative for procedures. The real value is not in the specific expertise, but in the mindset: willingness to learn, get one's hands dirty, and think differently.

During my first week of medical school, a distinguished physician offered my class a great piece of advice. An accomplished painter, he exhorted us to "Find something outside of medicine that makes you, you. And then keep doing it." Thirty years later, I think I finally understand the point of this advice—which thankfully was not to make me a painter. Medicine is result-driven: Was the diagnosis correct, the patient cured, the surgery successful? Weekend sabbaticals are process-driven: Did you learn something new, enjoy an opportunity for immersion, have a chance to be creative? That exploratory learning is a goal in and of itself.



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