

Dr Mark Tan

# Days

**T**he epilogue for the earlier experiences of the years reminisced...

I am happy to reassure you that there will be happy endings to your current trials. These, too, will pass. You do deserve your place here. The study of pure theory will end; you will earn your right to the wards. You will master the clinical examinations. And, yes, you too will pass the final MBBS.

And for those of you who through these tasks, think that you will falter, take courage. Maybe it will be for you that these battles are not yours to fight and other greater things will lie ahead.

And so then, what now? Where do you go from here?

I believe that yes, the dreams you had when deciding to be a doctor will come true. For most of us it will be such an indescribable joy to see them become real one by one. You will save lives. You will cure cancer. You will bring life into the world. You will make the lame walk again and the blind, see. You will hold in your hand, a heart.

And as the poets say, so now, with the days still left, will you walk in Fields of Gold?

Perhaps. But it may be for you too that this joy can only be bought at a great price.

Some of you will lose your sense of certainty in the world. Taught for five years to save lives, you may have to stand by the side as your patient succumbs to the pressure in his cranium, the infection in her lungs; as an order not to resuscitate this life has been invoked. You may have to bring a life into the arms of a mother, and in the next hour, ensure for her good, that another never, ever will. You may feel sad for the battered child who did not survive the fall but at the same time, you may feel a wrench of delight to which your dare not give a name. Her kidneys, finally, were a match for the child in her neighbouring bed.

Some of you will have to work harder than you have ever had before. You will work the whole month straight through. You will work 36-hour days. You will live from month to month, not knowing when you have to work these 36-hour days, in the same corridor and same room. It will take its toil, facing the same people, the same unsolvable problem.

You will get very angry over very small things. You will cry. Still the same corridor, and the same room.

And you will pay for your dreams with your youth. For some, a while. For some, forever lost would be the weekend breakfasts with your family and the parties till four in the morning. You will lose some friends and some of your dreams will have to be put aside. Take a look at yourself. Who are you, really? A scientist, an athlete, a dancer? Five months later, are you still? And why?

Some of us will weigh the benefits against the costs and decide that there are other endeavours more important in this life. As doctors through history have shown us, indeed there are, what with Nations to lead, Stories to write, Children to raise and Space to explore?

For others among us though, something deep down will tell us that our path lies here. How then can we sustain ourselves in our darker moments, when we feel these costs are too great to bear?

Some of us will be pragmatic and realise that these dark moments are just that, moments. Like all things in life, these too will soon pass. Amidst the midnight collapse, the plug that cannot be set, we will stand firm as tomorrow with its cortisol, coffee and rested colleagues will come around.

For some of us that will not be enough, and we will decide like the bards, that all these tomorrows in their pace will light us to dusky death. For some of us there are things in life worth living at its highest – our knowledge, virtues, outcomes and it



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will be striving for our profession's own Eudemonia that earns us our place in this world.

And we will remember some of us who have been there and back again that for them, it had not been the answer. For them, they had learnt that it was more important to be kind above all. Perhaps, in the words of the saints, it is really through giving to all men that we receive. Where then should we, starting out in this profession find our meaning? From the past, we seem to find no one answer.

But maybe, we should be glad that even the wisest in the past cannot agree, and this way we can and will decide for our generation how best to live our lives and our profession. And we are very fortunate that in our profession, we are uniquely placed to express our lives through the way we heal, lead, comfort, invent and craft in a very important place. This place is a very special one in time, as it is at some of the most intimate and emotional points in the personal lives of our neighbourhood's people.

We are there at the birth of a couple's child, the death of a family's father, the maiming of a nation's hundred and the illness of the world's billions. Who are our heroes who will guide us

at these points today? Osler, Teresa, the catcher in the Rye? How should we act and which of the values of the world today should we bring to each of our scenes? Piety, Freedom, Justice? It's My Life, a Good Citizen, Who dares, Wins?

Which should we apply at a given place and a given time? When should one philosophy rise and another fall? How should we choose?

Perhaps that is the price of things in this world. To redeem another life, it may cost us our own. And maybe, through spending our lives finding what's right for us will we find our meaning. ■

*"What are days for?  
Days are where we live  
They come, they wake us  
Time and time over.  
They are to be happy in,  
Where can we live but days?"*

*Ah, solving that question  
Brings the priest and the doctor  
In their long coats  
Running over the fields."*

- Philip Larkin