

# Old Steps, New Shoes

By Sumitra Aswani

By the time I arrived at the Dean's Office 36 hours after my initial leap of faith, armed with sweaty palms and a grand speech, I was primed to face the only answer I was expecting. Instead, I was met with a knowing smile and an affirmative "When would you like to start?"

The decision to take a year off school was made on a particularly discouraging Sunday morning. By afternoon, I had received approval from my parents within ten seconds of my asking. Monday proved to be without obstacle, and by Tuesday morning, I was facing a year without obligation, and no plan to substantiate. There was nothing but time and space on the horizon, and after three days of being convinced that this was the only way forward, it occurred to me that this was a far more frightening prospect than my adrenaline-junkie personality was trained to cope with. Fortunately, that was also the last time that doubt made an appearance.

It was never a secret how overwhelmed I felt about accepting the challenge of medical school at such a young age. 18, by my definition, is the age where the mighty world is at your feet, and you have no greater purpose than to dance atop its glistening surface in your best sequined shoes. 18 is the age where our reading lists ought to include manuals on the unpredictable substances that fill the juicy centre of life. With so little to show for our understanding of the big picture, 18 is not the age where we are equipped to sign our lives to an 11-year commitment – much less one as daunting as the pursuit of a career in medicine. And yet, a multitude of 18-year-olds before us have done it, so why shouldn't we?

But once the dotted line is met with ink, we quickly learn that the truest synonym to the word *doctor* is the word *sacrifice*. Time, relationships and hobbies are all – subtly at first, but blatantly soon enough – downgraded in the priority scramble. We try our best to do everything, all the time, but it would be

Overlooking the enchanting city of Florence

misleading to say that we actually can do it all and do it well.

At this juncture, I pause to be pelted with metaphorical tomatoes. After all, many before me, for generation upon generation, have entered and suffered a similar fate, and they have all managed to burrow through the madness to receive the well-deserved salutation on the other side. But before I am written off as a spoilt young product of “Generation Whine”, let me first invite you to sit next to me on a point we are more likely to agree upon.

We are all on an endless search for something. Whether it is the pursuit of happiness, wealth, spirituality, knowledge, love, or achievement, universally we are looking for something to give us meaning – a reason to wake up in the morning to face another day.

Early on we become masters of the “what” and “where” in that pursuit. Subsequently we manoeuvre the “why”, “how” and “when” to get there. Definitions are easy, but the difficult component of our journey forward lies in taking every pain and discarding every impediment that presents itself along the way.

The idea of interrupting my studies first crossed my mind early in my second year as I watched my list of “things I would love to be doing instead of microbiology” grow longer and more desperate. But it wasn't until I found myself dragging my feet to the hospital in the middle of the fourth year that I realised the problem was not going to go away without intervention. I was met with more furrowed brows than encouraging pats on the back when I proposed the idea to my colleagues, but it didn't change the fact that I was functioning well below par and consequently becoming both a hazard to myself and a nuisance to everyone around. I was on my way to personifying that disgruntled cogwheel in the social machinery I never wanted to be, and suddenly my well-crafted definitions of “who”, “what”, “where”,

“why”, “when” and “how” became completely meaningless as my heart fell out of sync.

When I took a year off school, in the beginning I was obsessed with having tangible objectives to justify my decision. By the end, I had accomplished the only one that mattered – I was recharged and raring to go again.

And in the middle, the magnitude of time allowed me to travel, read and learn the pivotal lessons that only an unencumbered life can teach. It gave me the opportunity to mend old relationships and to discover enriching new ones. The great privilege of time enabled me to daydream without interruption and stroll without direction, as the borders of definition melted away to make space for all possibilities. The unbelievable freedom that unfettered time provided was everything I had been looking for when minutes and hours were always running out and leaving me behind. Most significantly, the year off gave me back the one relationship I had been missing the most – the one I have with myself.

Some of the more memorable months of my year were spent in India, largely in the enjoyable company of my grandmother who took me through the family history and a heritage that I had never before thought to enquire about. I was able to dip my curious fingers into religious folklore one day and taste the imperfect workings of India's public health system the next. Acquaintances shared stories so far beyond my own imagination as I journeyed from city to village and found myself being in touch with the Indian in me for the first time.

I journeyed too, into my father's birthplace in Malang, Indonesia, where I relived the genesis of my grandfather's business, which has since provided me with every good fortune a young girl could ask for. Learning about beginnings gives a whole new meaning to endpoints. You can appreciate so succinctly that we simply had to have been there first,



Taking in the sights at various sites: Venice, ...



... Shanghai ...



... and Siem Reap





The immaculate Nasrid Palace at the Alhambra, Granada, Spain

before we could have gotten here. That quickly became the only measure of my progress – good or bad, I can only get to where I want to be once I have completed this rite of passage.

The remaining time was shared between other new cities, including three months on

the road in Europe, and much needed refuge in the comfort of my own family home. As thrilling as it was to live out of a suitcase, there was nothing quite like the simple pleasure of an afternoon in the company of my loved ones, without the lingering guilt of yet another exam to revise for.

I consider myself charmed to have had confluence collude in my favour as far as opportunity and support go. There is nothing more fulfilling than doing what you love. Often, we encounter people who are weighed down by what they are obliged to do, but for those of us who have the exceptional privilege of

choice, it is the greatest pity not to be realising just those things that make us come alive – and going forth with gratitude.

I've always believed that the greatest guiding principle in life is choosing love over fear. When we can decide to let the love of the process supersede the fear of the consequence, then perhaps we can finally say that we are on the right path. But I am a 23-year-old girl, what could I possibly know of life?

I'd like to think that I know a few things. I know that when I looked deep into who I was becoming, I didn't like what I was seeing. I know that since I have returned, I am more excited about becoming a doctor than I ever have been before. I know that I could never have addressed the needs of those I am meant to serve without first addressing the needs of the one person I am primarily responsible for. And I know that confronting my problem, and subsequently not stopping till I had mended it, has made all the difference. A cliché can only be categorised as such because it was at first borne of truth, after all.

Finally, I know that in the pursuit of all things true, there isn't always an answer, but there are usually options. How we decide to plough through life is an exercise of choice, but fundamentally we all have our means and ways, beliefs and boundaries, and while these often force us into choosing one answer over another, we can't always be going forward. Sometimes we need to take a step back and then a little to the right, before continuing on. You'll tend to find that even marching can be satisfying when you return wearing your best sequined shoes. **SMA**



Barefoot in autumn in Maastricht, the Netherlands



Sumitra Aswani was away from school from October 2009 to October 2010. She has since returned to complete her degree at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, and will be entering her final year in June 2011.