Let Us Run

Wobbling around the kitchen, my mother's high heels are slipping around on my 5-year-old feet. A goofy smile on my face, I dream of the day when I will fit into these shoes. It seems so close, yet so far away. Those shoes seem so impossibly big, but the fact they will one day fit perfectly is intangibly real. These are the shoes of the women in medicine who came before us—the big shoes that remind us of how far we have yet to go, how big we can dream, the ideals to live up to, and the legacy to fulfill. To be a woman in medicine is both a challenge and an honor. It imparts a lasting commitment to lifelong pursuit of medical excellence while breaking boundaries and delivering compassionate care. I am grateful for the women mentors I have seen practicing medicine with a heart of integrity and an artful hand, inspiring others to do the same. It serves as a continual reminder that the gift of our medical education is not simply an accomplishment, but also comes with the responsibility of serving those in need.

To provide healing to our patient—in their most vulnerable moments—is not something to take for granted, but something requiring great character. I believe this worthiness is not given, but rather earned. It is not handed out along with our medical degree, but rather procured through hours of dedicated work to our patients, community, and peers. I believe the values of motivation, compassion, and conscientiousness are ways of thinking which, with practice, become ways of life. As we continue to reshape the traditional white-man-white-coat medicine hierarchy, there is an increased emphasis on *who* we are in medicine, not only *what* we can do. We are the who: the women, the underrepresented, the minorities. Just as paintings made with many colors are often the most stunning, medicine made up of diversity is the most beautiful. And dare I say, most impactful. The people who often shine the brightest in medicine are those with the stories of greatest overcoming to get there.

Throughout my journey in medicine, I have been constantly inspired and supported by the amazing women physicians alongside me. Their accomplishments are extraordinary: from awards and honors to national advocacy and research. Yet these accomplishments are outmatched by their competency and the excellent medical care they provide. These women's actions serve to inspire other physicians—and more broadly— inspire the medical community.

We commonly hear the phrase "a ripple effect". In our minds we see a body of water, the surface in motion with tiny waves, each one leading to another. In the center—the inciting force. In medicine, each of us women are the inciting force. We create ripples with everything we do, and this shapes the water for the next generation. From the smallest of actions to the grandest of initiatives. Each woman who paved the way in medicine has this impact, such as Elizabeth Blackwell, the first female physician, and Mary Edward Walker, the first female surgeon. We are only where we are now because of the ripples they made. The incredible women who came before us left footsteps to guide us. By learning from their legacy and stepping into their shoes, we can grow to fill them. We too can incite ripples of compassionate care and medical excellence. Just was I once stood in my mother's heels and dreamed big, let us never forget how the prior generations of women dreamed big, and determinedly filled these shoes before handing them on to us. I believe that each of us contributes to this journey which paves the way for more women to enter medicine, creating ripples of positive impact for the future.

Indeed, sometimes the smallest actions have the biggest impact. In residency, I participated in a rural medicine program which involved going to a remote town and teaching health topics to elementary school children. I will never forget the moment when my co-resident (also a woman) and I entered the classroom: there was awe shinning on the faces of the young girls. One proclaimed, “You’re not what we expected, you’re pretty lady doctors!” In this moment, I felt those metaphorical shoes start to fit, as *I* was now the one showing the next generation of women what is possible. I want every young girl to believe that they can do anything, be anything. I want to show them how big they can dream, and that one day they too could be a woman in medicine. They can wear these shoes.

Elizabeth Blackwell and Mary Edward Walker, along with numerous others, were the first to wear these shoes—brave and strong enough to stand in them. The next generation started walking in them, crossing more boundaries, such as when Antonia Novello made history as the first female and first Hispanic U.S. Surgeon General in 1990. Three years later, Dr. Joycelyn Elders, the first board-certified pediatric endocrinologist, was appointed US Surgeon General, making her the first black doctor and second woman to hold the position.

That was 1993. For most of us, that was during our lifetime (except perhaps for some medical students and residents). The value in remembering the recency in these events is to shed light on the distance we have yet to go. Women, let us continue blazing this path. Let us stride forward and break remaining barriers. Let us continue to actualize a future with greater equity. Just as the women before us stood and then walked. Now, let’s run.