

Balance Pedal Breathe: A Journey Through Medical School

Holly Salzman, MD

AUTHOR AFFILIATION:

San Diego, CA

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Book Title: Balance Pedal Breathe: A Journey Through Medical School

Book Author: Claire Unis

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Balance Pedal Breathe, a memoir by pediatrician Claire Unis, MD, explores the heart of becoming a physician and ultimately finding meaning. She tells “the story of a willful, would-be doctor who tried to hold on to the before-self, the not-doctor self, even as she could feel herself changing over the four years of medical education leading up to her degree” (p. 5). Unis intertwines snippets of journal entries and reflections on prior life events and her love of the outdoors with medical school experiences, bidding the reader to join her on her journey.

An avid hiker, skier, mountain biker, rock climber, equestrian, and swing dancer, Unis’ uniquely perceptive observational skills are shared in beautiful prose as she takes us through her medical school career, starting with meeting her anatomy lab cadaver for the first time. “Beneath each sheet lay answers to questions I had not yet fully formed, mysteries wrapped in sinew, shrouded by flesh, concealed by skin” (p. 7). In similar fashion, she shares her experiences through each phase of medical school. During basic science years, she laments the gibberish that she fought to turn into a foundation of knowledge and shares her self-doubt honestly. She likens her first clinical rotation to being in a foreign exchange program, with the new environment both unfamiliar and disorienting. She forges on, struggling with disillusionment that being a doctor doesn’t always equate with the power to heal. Despite gaining confidence, she wrestles with deciding what career path she will choose, grappling with how each choice might add meaning and purpose to her life. Unis concludes by sharing her epiphany of meaning as she prepares to start residency: “What mattered, I knew, wasn’t how often I would get outside, nor how many songs I would dance to in a night or a year. It was how much of the wonder I could carry inside me to share with other people. It was listening with an open heart, risking sadness to care, being present enough to make someone else’s life better”

(p. 289).

With words that are of themselves a work of art and a joy to read, Unis’ self-reflections touch on themes universal to the medical education experience. We share her awe at the wonderful workings of the human body and its ability to self-heal. We remember our first struggles, when we wondered if we really were meant to be a doctor. We recall our own sense of imposter syndrome, when we were always fearful that we would be found out. We reexperience our concern that our passion for our chosen field would limit our enjoyment of the nonmedical parts of our lives. Finally, through her eyes, we relearn who we are at our deepest core and vow to live our lives to their fullest.

Unis’ engagingly written and skillfully crafted *Balance Pedal Breathe* invites the mindful remembrance of the practicing physician’s own medical journey and encourages renewed love of medicine. It rekindles passion for teaching, reminding us of our role in shaping the careers of those we are privileged to teach. The reader who is still in training, whether student or resident, will be challenged to live in the moment and to invest in what matters most in life. It will remind them that there can be success after initial failure and will reassure during times of self-doubt when they feel alone in their struggle to succeed. *Balance Pedal Breathe* is a beacon of hope for the future and will be a valuable read for all who seek to rekindle (or find) the joy in their career.