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Family Medicine

NARRATIVE ESSAY

In the Arena: A Narrative of Grit, Resilience, and Becoming

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I am not here despite my past. I am here because of it.

As a family medicine physician, I often teach about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and how they shape a person's lifelong health and well-being. When I teach about ACEs, I usually say that my mother probably would have screened positive on nearly every item. She had me at 17, had four children by the time she was 24, and never graduated from high school. She was in foster care as a child, then battled addiction for most of her adult life. And despite it all, her four children graduated from high school, driven by the value she was denied: pursuing education.

She passed away in 2023 at the age of 55, just 4 days short of her 56th birthday. While we were told that no drugs were involved in her immediate death, they certainly impacted her health. Her life was hard and unforgiving. But it was still filled with dreams, especially dreams for her children. I know she wanted to live a good life. And maybe, in some way, through us, she lived her best life.

At 17, I was briefly homeless. I slept on couches, depending on the kindness of friends and their families, and navigated the college application process. At the same time, my younger sister, still in high school, faced instability no teenager should ever experience. Winters with no heat. Months of food stamps and tight budgets. We both know what it feels like to be scared and cold. We also know what it feels like to be loved and believed in, for me, often by people who have nothing to gain from helping me except the joy of seeing someone thrive.

When people see me now, a white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed family physician with a Latino-sounding name, they assume I grew up with privilege and that I got my name through marriage. However, my last name isn't from a husband; it's from my father, a Colombian immigrant who was not part of my upbringing. And if you met me, you probably would make the same assumption. It's human, we all do it! Even in medicine, where we strive to care without judgment, we can still be shaped by implicit bias and first impressions. Moments like these remind me why humility and curiosity are so important in family medicine, because assumptions can cloud our understanding, and our patients deserve to be seen fully, not filtered through unconscious biases.

These experiences didn't make me weaker. They shaped me into the family physician I am today—someone who listens deeply when a patient hesitates to admit they can't afford medication, or when a student seems withdrawn. I understand that success isn't always linear and that second chances can change lives.

Still, resilience alone isn't enough. I once grew frustrated with a patient who kept missing appointments, expecting them to advocate for themselves as I have learned to do. However, I realized that not everyone has had the chance to develop that ability. Sometimes, just showing up is an act of courage. My story taught me grit; my patients continue to teach me humility.

I remember once reading Michelle Obama's book, *Becoming*, and nodding along to her words. Like her, I didn't want to repeat the patterns of my childhood. I wanted more than survival; I wanted (and still want) stability, recognition, and the freedom to dream. And yet, I have come to appreciate the quiet dignity with which my parents endured. Their lives were (and are) hard, but they taught me resilience, and that strength continues to shape the way I move through this world.

It's that same resilience I try to pass on to my students when they're facing their own setbacks. I think of Maya, a student who had failed Step one twice and was on the verge of

giving up. She felt ashamed and isolated, convinced that her setbacks defined her and that opening up would only invite more judgment. I listened, reminded her she wasn't alone, and promised to support her however I could—whether that meant navigating next steps or just being a safe place to land. Months later, she passed. Watching her pride and relief reminded me that resilience doesn't grow in isolation; it grows when someone believes in you, especially when you're struggling to believe in yourself.

I often reflect on Theodore Roosevelt's words:

> It is not the critic who counts; . . . The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, . . . who strives valiantly, who errs and falls short again and again . . . but who, at the best, knows the triumph of high achievement, and at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.[1]

I've dared greatly. I've failed, and I've gotten back up. My life and career are a testament to the quiet, stubborn resilience that defines so many of my patients.

As family physicians, we meet people where they are—in their moments of fear, of joy, of pain. But we also carry our own experiences. And sometimes, our students' and patients' experiences echo our own, reminding us of the quiet power of grit, the possibility of second chances, and the shared courage it takes to keep showing up. Being in the arena isn't just about struggle; it's about choosing to engage, to care, and to hope, even when it's hard. That's what I carry with me every day.

REFERENCE

1. Roosevelt T. *The man in the arena*. April 23, 1910[Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, France].