

Turbulent Undertow

By Mikayla Brockmeyer

Pushing off with my arms, I bear down uneasily, my feet hugging the board. I am activating what feels like every muscle in my body. Approximately five seconds later, I catch my first wave and start letting gravity do its job. But my smile and confidence quickly begin to fade, as I hear my Costa Rican surf coach yell, "Salta! Salta!" Alarm bells go off in my head, and I panic. Unable to jump off in time as he strongly suggests, the wave crashes down and plunges my face into the sand. Disoriented, eyes burning from the ocean I recently thought I loved, I manage a feeble kick in attempt to swim toward the surface for air. Instead, I am thrown down twice more, my head smacking the sandy bottom of the Playa Manuel Antonio shoreline. Gasping for air, I eventually overcome the turbulent undertow. My coach feigns sympathy, saying he's sorry he was unable to help me, but he was glad I'm okay. I know he means well, but I'm a little stunned. Thinking but not saying, "Señor, I almost drowned and all you can say is 'I'm glad you're okay?'"

I listen to the sound of strained panting for approximately five minutes while the hospitalist on the other end of the phone trudges up the stairs to the next floor. Then I hear the distinct whooshing and swishing sounds characteristic only of someone donning layers of PPE. "Okay, I'm going into room 802 first," the hospitalist says. At my place on the other end of the call, I am ready. I know the drill. This was the hospitalist's seventeenth consecutive day on call (out of an eventual thirty-five). My goal is the same: prepare the chart as thoroughly as possible and try to glean as much information as I can from the patient. Once they are transferred out of the ICU, patients are typically not able to vocalize well, if at all. I hear the doctor's voice say something along the lines of, "Diminished breath sounds bilaterally, crackles in the left lung base, no wheeze." My fingers fly over the keys. We proceed in this fashion, patient after patient, like COVID-19-assessing robots, moving down a conveyor belt of lung examinations and auscultations. Meeting up once rounds are finally finished, I catch a glimpse of his blood-shot eyes, matted hair, and weary expression. Without words, he is crying out to me, "Do you see me? I'm drowning." But as his scribe all I can manage to offer is a weak, "Glad you're okay." We collapse in a heap on our respective couches. After a few hours of fitful sleep, we will awake and do it all over again.

There are really no words to fully describe the upending loss that the year 2020 has had on us as global citizens, as Americans. We all started the year by paddling out, inherently hoping to catch good waves. But wave after wave of unexpected turmoil hit us with unrelenting force, battering our souls with every new headline. Yet, we continue to paddle out expectantly each day, wistfully thinking, "Today will be different." We are greeted instead by an unsparing current; one none of us can avoid: our own minds. Enduring accumulating fatigue associated with ungrieved losses and daily debates, we seek to desperately break free from the swirling internal vortices. As hope dwindles and we simultaneously gasp for air, the rhythmic ocean waves lift us out of our misery. Just as the coach extended compassion to a panicked beginner learning to

surf, we can validate one another and offer genuine feelings of understanding amidst a period of shared suffering across our nation. So, where do we go from here? As the waves roll in, I think we continue to ride it out – together. And in the moments between crashing crest and the tugging undertow, we remember to tell each other, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Mikayla Brockmeyer is a first-year osteopathic medical student at Des Moines University in Des Moines, Iowa. She began working as a hospitalist scribe in 2018, while she was enrolled in the Master of Science in Biomedical Sciences program at Des Moines University. She successfully defended her thesis in 2019 and spent her gap year scribing full time. This is her first time showcasing her storytelling abilities in a public arena. Her non-fiction essay “Turbulent Undertow” appears in the Fall 2020 *Intima*.

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