"Medical School Does Not Give Me Wings"

By Maya Beydoun

It starts off just as any other day: after my classes, I go to the dorms to have lunch and to start studying after a break. However, on my way home I pass by the photocopy center next door— the one I have been visiting now, for the last three years throughout my undergraduate studies in biology. As I step inside, I hear a loud super-friendly voice roaring: “Ahlan bil Doctora!” The seemingly everlasting noise of the photocopying machines stops. Everyone’s attention in the photocopy center seems to be focused on one little spot close to me. The world seems to have come to a stand-still. Students are contorting their heads in my direction and the manager fakes a warm smile— also in my direction. I wonder who that well-known and prestigious person might be and I start turning my head around, when I fearfully realize that I am the ‘Doctora’ who has just been saluted by the manager of the photocopy center!

During the very first weeks of my medical education I realize, the repercussions of what being a medical student has on society and on me: I am no longer introduced as Maya, but as ‘Al Doctora Maya’ (which can be translated as Doctor Maya). Situations as the one described above happen often. I am treated as the ‘busy doctor’ whose notes have to be photocopied quickly. I am treated with more respect and in a more friendly way. Relatives proudly tell friends or other family members that I am now in medical school. Being or becoming a doctor has an extra prestigious touch in Lebanon.

Medical degree and prestige often go hand-in-hand and often serve as the main engine that drives students to medical school. When talking to my friends, I found this statement to be confirmed many times. Many want to become medical doctors for the invariably accompanying reputation or because their parents want them to do so— in order to improve their ‘family status’. They either persuaded themselves that they ‘wanted’ to become medical doctors or their relatives did, where in fact it is only the status that they have been dreaming of. In addition to the prestige comes the notion of intelligence and superiority. I noticed that some medical students regarded themselves as cleverer and superior to “non-medical” students. A friend of mine proudly explained to me that, we medical students, were different and had different brains. Only WE could process such a huge amount of information. He added as we learned more than students of other majors, we had a broader horizon. My friend falsely believes that medical students are more cultured, whereas culture has nothing to do with factual knowledge but rather with literature, music and art.

Going into medical school involves a whole package. One cannot choose specific items of the package but one has to embrace it all. With it come the interesting facts to learn, the nice atmosphere in medical school among the students, the first encounter with a patient, the vivid ongoing process of learning but also the huge workload and a change of how one’s identity is perceived by others: my identity as perceived by others has changed, but my real identity has not. From the perspective of many I am no longer the same person I used to be. People look at me with more respect and introduce me as ‘Doctora Maya’. I, however, don’t enjoy this respect because I am still the same. I am still the same old Maya, as last summer and I don’t deserve a single drop of more respect just because I am now a medical student. My identity has not changed for me but for many others it has— it has become more prestigious. And it is exactly this, which makes me afraid! I am afraid of becoming affected by the ongoing influence from colleagues and friends, which might peak in me finally believing that I am better than the rest. I am afraid of becoming arrogant.

When studying in the medical library I see medical students who are in their third and fourth year of medical school. They walk with their heads up high. I often wonder why their necks don’t break, as their noses are so high in the air. To me they look arrogant. I realize that those students have been affected by the influence from friends and colleagues. Those are medical students, who do believe that they are better than the rest of unfortunate humanity who did not go to medical school. I have pity for these colleagues, as I understand why they are arrogant. The influence from the system comes from all sides and is persistent. With such an omnipresent pressure, it is not easy to stay with one’s feet firmly on the ground. The system just flushes one into a specific direction and if one doesn’t notice it, one doesn’t even feel the pressure and one becomes arrogant without even noticing it. My fear is not only to become arrogant one day but rather to become arrogant without noticing it— like my colleagues that I see “flying” in the medical library.

It is however my flying colleagues that I inaugurated as my personal memorial: they serve a higher purpose to me, as whenever I see them gliding in the medical library, I am reminded to keep my feet on the ground— to stay as I am now. Medical education is just as any other education and doesn’t make me a more cultured or a better person. Medical school makes me busy, but I have always been busy and in a hurry— especially when I need to copy some notes. Medical school changed the way society perceives me but it should not change the way I perceive myself. It should not change my personality and identity. As far as I am concerned, medical school does not give me wings!