Bridge over troubled waters

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It was the best of careers, it was the worst of careers; it was the age of medical wisdom, it was the age of libellous incompetence; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of *The Cartwright Enquiry*; it was the season of day shifts, it was the season of night shifts; it was the spring of hopeful study, it was the winter of exams. We had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going directly to specialty training, we were all going directly the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present days of RMO life, that some of its noisiest authorities (aka union reps) insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.¹

Working as a junior doctor is funny. Not in the ‘ha ha’ sense of the word funny, but rather in that it is difficult to pin down and describe what it feels like. Just when you think you have it sussed out, the rug is pulled and you are left reeling, wondering what is going on again. It is like a changing sea. One moment you find yourself in calm waters: knowing what is wrong with your patients; emergency calls are clean and everybody responds well to management; minor interventions are routine and successful and everything is plain sailing. You feel like El Capitan!

Then the wind changes.

There is an oesophageal variceal rupture, or a convulsing patient does not respond to maximal medical therapy for two hours; you simply fail an ABG stab multiple times; the delirious patient with an unstable c-spine fracture leaps out of bed and pins you to the wall by your neck (it would be possible to overpower him, but talking him down would be safer for his spinal cord).

Maybe that last wave of the tumultuous sea was more specific to my own experience, but we all get tossed around occasionally by the storms of practising medicine in vaguely similar ways—or at least so I gather from lunchroom tales. Occasionally it is enough to make one wonder how one ended up in these waters to begin with and, at the lowest times, sometimes

¹. Adapted from *A Tale of Two Cities* by C. Dickens (1859), Chapman & Hall (London)
one wonders how everyone else seems to manage so well! (It would appear the brave faces we all put on are quite convincing.)

When the day-to-day life of ordinary work is enough to make you wonder at times whether you are bipolar—and you add career goals with associated study, research and teaching, or the countless other work-associated activities that dominate our lives—it is little wonder that the famous ‘work–life balance’ we all talk about striving to achieve seems as unobtainable as Shangri-La.

Along with a handful of colleagues at the same stage of training as me, I am currently trying to study for part one exams—the next stage in the journey towards specialisation (hopefully). My time is as consumed with the need to study as it was ‘carefree’ before. The copious amount of time with my wife and three young children, and frequent social occasions with friends that I enjoyed as a PGY1 intern, have been replaced with the old familiar sense of guilt that I could be spending time studying (the same sense that was always there throughout university).

At each of my three-monthly goal setting review sessions, I always record on my report some variation of the theme that I am endeavouring to achieve the aforementioned better ‘work–life balance’. Previously this meant that I was going to use more of my leisure time to read around cases and improve my clinical knowledge; now it means time for family and friends is harder to find outside of study.

In the face of this change of the tide, I have finally taken on board the advice of one of my sage, more senior colleagues, and have created a spreadsheet life-planner. This rigid spontaneity–draining exercise has been paradoxically liberating. Aside from serving as a great procrastination excuse—it needed to be colour coded, and also detailed enough to show my plans for what days the lawn would be mowed—it has also worked wonders at suppressing feelings of guilt when not studying.

It has allowed for a happier home life—playing with my children, assisting my wife with new baby duties—and a happier home life means more support through what is a more stressful time. The balance of time spent in each activity has not changed significantly, but everything seems more manageable.

For those going through anything remotely similar, remember to develop and reach out to your support network, I would not cope without mine.

Also I am told things get better... then worse again... then better... then worse again ad infinitum. In part that is what keeps it interesting though. It is a funny job and I, for one, love it. I hope you do too.