

LOOK IN WHEN LOCKED IN: TIME TO REFLECT!



BY DR. ARUN C. GULANI

In these unprecedented times, we can surely despair, and yet we can prepare to spring forward.

My conceptual teaching for eye surgeons in training is, *“How we react to pressure determines whether we become diamonds or crumble like charcoal. Hence, look at every difficult time as a polisher: Let it rub you the right way so we end up sparkling even more.”*

These unprecedented times remind me of the recent global nightmare we faced when our ocean-front home was struck twice, by hurricanes Matthew and Irma, and became a time of personal tragedy, perceived helplessness, and I got into the ‘Why me?’ mode.”

While in this personally fragile mode, I was approached by a private equity firm that wanted to buy my practice for an eight-figure sum – to include relocating me to Malibu as an exclusive surgeon to movie stars and celebrities.

I went into my ‘locked-down-look-in’ mode and asked myself, “What drove me? Was it money? Would it be geography – in this case, Malibu?” And my answer was no! I loved what I did every

day and it made the world fly to my location. I am addicted to my patients' surgical outcomes and love treating them like family. So, I refused the attractive private equity offer and to ensure that my wavering mind 'got the message,' while facing staggering expenses for home repair, I invested everything I could and built the world's first cataract spa in Jacksonville.

My mind got the message! And I changed my attitude from 'Why me?'" to 'Try me!'"

While we have been 'locked down' in our houses, may I encourage you to 'look in, and lock yourself down in your conscience for a while. Get inside, stay there and look at you. You're you, and you don't have to wear any paraphernalia.'

Use this time for personal reflection — to think about the areas of your life that you enjoy, that you don't enjoy things that are working well for you, and things needing improvement. It's a rare circumstance indeed that so many people have had to stop and think deeply about their lives. How often do people have the chance to get off of the hamster wheel of routine and hard work?

It's a good time to ask yourself important questions. "Are you happy? Are you doing what you want? As a doctor, is your practice going the way you would like? If not, what can you do to change it?" Self-reflection gives people an opportunity to look into the metaphorical mirror and conduct a mental and emotional check-in.

Most notably, I encourage doctors to recall why they became a doctor. Is it your dream to have 'waiting' rooms packed with delayed, complaining patients who came in following expensive advertisements, and then hurtling them through cookie-cutter surgery mills with constant fear of repercussions? Is it right that so many doctors are constantly anxious about their external environment, envious of colleagues, and then waiting for 5 p.m. to get out of their offices?

My metric for a doctor's success is simple: If a patient's life is improved, then the doctor has done their job. "Think about it. If you're a surgeon and none of your postoperative patients are calling you with any complaints during this lockdown time – that means you've done an amazing job. Your patients are healed! You should be happy."

Your patient decides your success, not you and that is the highest accountability of success, not engineered statistical charts. My worldwide patients (some of the most demanding personalities in the world) are on Facebook (with no incentive) sharing their stories. That surely is for hope to similar patients but I use that as my gauge to success. It keeps me in check.

Authenticity is the most important factor. Patients appreciate a personal touch and being treated as humans rather than as simply a source of income for a doctor. You have to have the persona and the heart, not just the look. Patients will come to see you because they like *you* personally.

I respect members of the medical community, especially those dealing with COVID-19. People often say that doctors are on the front line. Who else could stay up for 72 hours in high-stress situations and still appear professional and capable to perform complicated eye-hand coordinated surgical procedures? Doctors are rock stars!

To doctors, I say, you were among the smartest in your class at college; hence, you achieved a medical seat. Then among these intelligent medicos, you were so smart that you achieved the very coveted ophthalmology residency. So, why are you anxious and worried? There is nothing you cannot do.

When it comes to ophthalmologists, I believe we must realize how specially privileged we are. We can use our fingers on a 3-centimeter eyeball and change a patient's life while they are breathing. How amazing is that?

To be continued ...

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