

# Thoracic Surgery Residents Association Inaugural Presidential Address: Preserving the passion in cardiothoracic surgery training



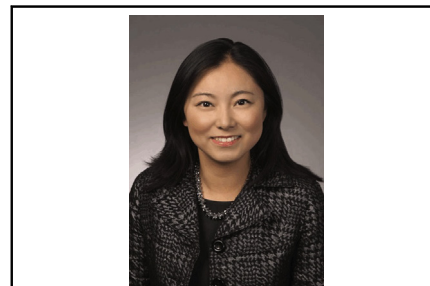
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I remember the awe of feeling a human heart beating in my palm for the first time. I was in high school and highly impressionable—mesmerized by its beauty, its persistent unwavering nature, and inspired by the sense of purpose and commitment of the team around me working toward a common goal. I knew then that cardiothoracic surgery was what I wanted to do with my life.

Over the years, I remained totally invested in this singular drive, fueled by the image of who I wanted to become, the patients I hoped to help, and the support and encouragement of those around me. Throughout college and medical school, grueling days spent juggling exams, research deadlines, and other activities, I never lost sight of this goal.

But nothing quite prepares you for the transformative process of training. Fast forward a few years, and now I am more than halfway through my residency. There are days when I look back and think how naïve I was to the pressures and challenges of the field—particularly on days when sleep is hard to come by, when the demands seem endless, and it feels like nothing you do is quite good enough.

There was a particularly difficult day last year when I got complacent and a mistake on a routine part of a case almost led to catastrophe. I was devastated, completely shaken by the experience, replaying the moment over and over again, and feeling as though I could not move on from it. Noticing that I seemed upset and down on myself, an attending physician asked me a question I've thought about often: "But are you better than you were 2 weeks ago?" I realized that yes, I was. Despite the mistake that seemed insurmountable, I was better. I was more aware of the infinite number of things that can go wrong at any point during a case and that every step can have potentially devastating consequences. Much to my relief, the patient did well.



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## CENTRAL MESSAGE

Preserving the passion in training is essential on this lifelong journey to becoming a cardiothoracic surgeon.

## PERSPECTIVE

This inaugural TSRA presidential address highlights the inherent challenges of training, the importance of learning from and moving past mistakes, and provides insight into how to preserve the passion for the field through training and beyond.

In the midst of training, it is hard to step back and realize that you are improving, gaining a little more responsibility in the operating room, becoming a bit more facile at finding the needle angle that seemed impossible a month ago, feeling a little more confidence in dealing with that unstable postoperative patient in the intensive care unit.

Sometimes it is hard to see the forest through the trees when you are in the depth of the struggle. It is easy to lose sight of the confident, competent, and compassionate surgeon we all want to become. It is no wonder that burnout is a real phenomenon within our specialty, affecting up to half of current surgeons.<sup>1</sup> But through it all, we must realize that challenges and mistakes are part of the training process. Making fewer of them as we move forward is what is ultimately important. Particularly on the tough days, realize that being a resident physician is temporary, and most practicing cardiothoracic surgeons are happy with their career choice.<sup>2</sup>

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Cardiothoracic surgery is hard, and it is supposed to be hard. None of us entered this field expecting it would be easy. We wanted to put forth time and energy into something infinitely challenging to make a difference in peoples' lives while contributing to society in a meaningful way. I think this sentiment is most aptly described by Dr Michael Debakey in a book I first read in medical school and one I like to go back to from time to time: *Medicine, Preserving the Passion in the 21st Century*. He writes<sup>3</sup>:

*Despite the frustrations...if you were attracted to medicine because of a genuine desire to help others and because you enjoy intellectual challenges, you will find immense satisfaction in your daily work and can preserve the passion for medicine... As physicians, we are invited into the most intimate chambers of our patients' lives. We should acknowledge that unfettered trust with dignity, deference, and respect. For a physician, caring for patients is not only a duty; it is a privilege. Alleviating pain and restoring health for another human being induce an exhilaration that few others experience in their careers. That professional gift deserves exquisite care.*

Preserving the passion through training can take on different forms for different people. The key, I believe, is being able to gain perspective on our work. Whether that involves cultivating a hobby outside of residency, spending a few extra minutes to chat with a patient about his family, or mentoring a medical student just starting to engage in the field. Whatever it is that helps us appreciate the importance

of what we do and find meaning in our professional commitment.

The start of a new year and a new decade brings along all the hopes for everything to come. And my hope for all of my fellow residents is to never forget what drew us to the field in the first place—what we love about it—and preserve that passion through training and beyond. Remember the joy of touching a beating heart for the first time or the first time you watched the lungs inflate before your eyes, and never forget that we have been given a gift to be able to make a priceless difference in someone's life. And realize that there is nothing else like it.

I end this inaugural Thoracic Surgery Residents Association Presidential Address with a Winston Churchill quotation that is particularly fitting for embarking on this lifelong journey of becoming a cardiothoracic surgeon:

*Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path. You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb.*

## References

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