

Reflective essay

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Unfulfilled and dispirited. Yes, those are the words I would use to describe my feelings over the past two years. That zeal inside me that fuelled my passion to study medicine, and then psychiatry, was slowly fading. Why? I couldn't quite put a finger on it. After all, I was working in my chosen career, with patients that were fascinating, amongst colleagues that were outstanding, and at a hospital I felt privileged to work at. But still, something was missing.

The 16 year old me, rather idealistically, envisioned the 30-year old me working with [Médecins Sans Frontières](#), in exotic lands doing rather useful things 'to help those less fortunate than myself.' I imagine that translated into working in poverty-stricken or war-torn countries. But what had happened to that dream? Had I lost interest? I suppose that on some level, with newfound cynicism, the dream was still there in the recesses of my mind, but the reality was somewhat less straightforward. I had become so immersed in the landscape of a trainee, climbing the career ladder and ticking the required boxes, that I had forgotten my personal ambitions and deferred my seemingly 'intangible' dream.

And then one day during maternity leave, I received an email advertising an event entitled 'Spirituality, disasters and mental health'. Wow! Could this be the answer to my long-forgotten dream? Suddenly, my thoughts were racing! Excitement consumed me. Volunteering in a disaster! Where would I go? How would I get there? Whom should I contact? I quickly signed myself up for the conference, arranged childcare for my newborn, and went along. I'm not entirely sure what I expected, but it was a breath of fresh air. Being amongst the chatter and buzz of so many psychiatrists of every grade, from all over the country, with a palpable passion to help others was exhilarating. Even more than that, their ability to turn their dreams into reality was truly inspirational. I finally felt a sense of purpose again. They shared their stories of working in distant lands such as Haiti, Somaliland, Malawi and Lebanon, and I was left feeling truly humbled. How had I done so little whilst they had done so much? Refusing to feel defeated, I challenged myself to turn my thoughts into action. The flame in me was reignited.

So, the passion was back. What next? How would I manage to go abroad? In retrospect, the 16 year-old version of me had failed to consider 'life' and all its realities; children, work, bills. I knew my husband had similar interests and so wouldn't take much convincing, but he was in the midst of a 4-year intensive university specialist program and working part-time to fund it. I knew it wouldn't be feasible for him to balance work, study and the kids on his own whilst I was away. I felt the reins tightening but refused this time to let that deter me. Perhaps I had to plan this for the following year. So do I just sit around and wait until then? What else could I do? I then recalled one of the speakers at the conference saying that they

were looking for volunteers to work locally. Okay, so this was less dramatic than going to Haiti, but would it be as fulfilling? I wasn't sure.

I pondered over the idea for some time. I didn't want to volunteer 'just for the sake of volunteering.' Was there really something I could contribute? And would I be able to offer anything that was not already available? My skills? I was not sure they were particularly unique or outstanding. Great, that didn't exactly help. I was just a regular psychiatrist, passionate about mental health. I thought more about my personal qualities, attributes and background, and what I could bring to the table. Being a Southeast Asian Muslim, I started to think about whether I could work with ethnic minority groups in my local area. I was acutely aware of some of the obstacles to accessing mental health care in these communities, including stigma, spiritual beliefs about mental illness, and a general lack of education about mental health. I had always felt frustrated by the ease at which people would blame their mental health problems on weakness of faith or 'evil spirits.' But I also understood and empathised with their frustration at the medical profession for dismissing their deep-rooted beliefs about the potential causes and cures for these problems. I started to feel strongly that I could bridge this gap; I am a person of faith and a mental health professional. My day job had revealed the deleterious effects of delaying seeking help and treatment, and the impact this had on families and communities. At times, this delay was due to families scouting out local healers and traditional medicine practitioners, before seeking professional medical help. Why could they not go hand in hand? Why was there a lack of trust in the psychiatry profession? All fired up, I was ready to go.

Armed with my passion in one hand and my mobile phone in the other, I rummaged through all my contacts for anyone who may have one foot in this particular door. To my surprise, a friend who ran a Girls Scouts club invited me to speak to the teenage girls about issues of depression and self-harm. Bingo! Could it really be that simple? She checked their schedule, I checked my diary and we booked in for a Sunday in December 2015. Another friend arranged for me to speak about child and adolescent mental health issues in a community centre in Tooting even sooner, 23rd November 2015! I was full of excitement and felt the possibilities were endless. I sat down and drafted an email to several mosques and schools in my local area detailing who I was, what my goals were, and why I thought mental health education was so important. Click. Sent.

The very next day I received a reply from the Chairman of a Mosque and Community Centre, expressing interest and requesting a meeting. I eagerly replied suggesting a time. I was walking around, head in the clouds, really happy with how fast things were moving. But I was quickly brought back down to earth. The waiting continued, still no reply. I even checked my sent items to be sure I had actually sent the email. Patience had never been a virtue of mine. A meeting was finally arranged, and the chairman and I spoke at length, sharing ideas about what would be helpful for the congregation. We decided on a series of talks about common mental health problems, with a question and answer session at the end. A date for my second talk was set, 20th December 2015. My excitement quickly turned to nervous energy. The

chairman spoke of advertising my talk with posters, and promoting it in the weekly Friday prayers preceding it. He expected a large audience and suggested transmitting the talk across the two halls in the mosque. I started to doubt myself...was I really qualified to do this? I was only a core trainee. Would the congregation expect someone more senior? What if they asked questions I couldn't answer? Should I do some revision? Calm down. Breathe. Breathe again.

Okay. Rewind. The talk at the mosque was not for another month. First up, my talk at the community centre in Tooting. I knew this was a more intimate affair, about 20 attendees, and therefore less anxiety provoking. Demographic? Women in their late 20's to early 40's. Topic? Depression and self-harm in children and adolescents – a huge topic! Time? 45 minutes with a 15-minute question and answer session at the end. Armed with the construct, I spent the weekend preparing, writing bullet points and thinking about case scenarios I could use as examples. The day of the talk arrived. I was too busy at work during the day to think about it and too busy after work getting the kids off to bed to worry. As I drove up to the venue I felt surprisingly calm. I reminded myself to have realistic expectations of my own performance and that it was okay to make mistakes. Just don't trip on the way in! The women came in and gathered around, eager to hear what I had to say. Within ten minutes, true to my style, it turned into a very interactive but relaxed session. The women seemed genuinely interested in my perspective on mental health, and bravely started sharing their own experiences. We elicited that many of the South Asian women were not accustomed to communicating openly with their children, and were worried they would not know what to do if they self-harmed. Many of the women felt empowered to know that these problems were far more common than they imagined, and took comfort in the realisation that professional help was readily available. Before we knew it, the session had gone on for two hours, and the organisers had to bring the session to a close. Time-management has also never been my forte! As I was getting ready to leave, several women approached me to invite me to speak at their local community centres and to give talks via webinar. My response was 'webi-what?' Before leaving, I asked the women to provide anonymous feedback so that I could improve my presentation next time, and I received many useful tips.

As I walked to my car in the silence of the night, all I felt was contentment. I hadn't expected it to go so smoothly, and to be so enjoyable for me. Who would have thought so little effort could achieve so much. Was it much? I felt so. I noticed the change in paradigm amongst the women listening to me. Commenting on something they learnt, one wrote that if faced with a child with mental illness, she now realized 'the need to show children that it is okay to be unwell and as parents we need to be positive. Positive behavior is supportive behavior'. Another highlighted the importance of seeking medical help early. I could sense something significant; faced with a young family member suffering from mental illness, these women would now do something differently than before they had walked into the room. And that was enough for me. At least for that night.

I reached home tired but fulfilled. As I lay in bed exhausted, I started to think about all the ways in which I could help my community right here at home. Perhaps I didn't need to travel five thousand miles to make a difference. Maybe I could positively influence the lives of five hundred people in my very own city. And with that thought, I fell into a deep sleep.