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Pulling Out of Afghanistan

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to the anonymous student who inspired the work.

Pulling Out of Afghanistan

Just last week was late August and I ran into a student. We were talking and she mentioned that her parents were born in Afghanistan. I paused. My heart did not know which direction to go in. I was immediately wondering if anyone she knew was still there. What to say to this accomplished, eager young medical student standing in front of me? Thirteen U.S. Marines had just given their lives extending their hands in peace. Ninety or so Afghans were being mourned.

She continued. Her aunt was a nurse and was evacuated. She was safe after having worked in a hospital under the privileges of foreign interest as the country she worked for evacuated her. I was grateful to hear the news. I wanted to hear more reassuring stories.

She shared wonderful history from her family. Her father had played soccer for the country. He had played for the Afghanistan National Team. “Well, the former one anyway.” My heart sank. It may have meant that the team was formerly known by this name. I did not know enough about soccer in Afghanistan. It sounded like a reference to a formerly known as country. The new government name and the self-representation is not yet announced.

Just last month was late July and the Olympics’ opening day. Afghanistan as a country entered The National Stadium in Tokyo, Japan. A man and a woman held the flag. The woman was dressed in an “intricate, gorgeous” (people.com) outfit that placed her on the best dressed list. Today the whole idea of this exact image being available in four years lays in an uncertain pool of global concern.

The young medical student continued to say how she had been in the U.S. for quite some time now. None of her family was left in Afghanistan. Everyone was safe.

Life and its balance tipped in her favor.

How can balance be feeling safe means no longer living in a home country? How can balance be a possible future where a woman cannot hold her own flag, or be so covered that beautiful garments are not seen?

My fear looms. What if there are only so many moments ahead of a wonderful conversation with a young, female medical student from Afghanistan? I continued the conversation with the medical student whose family was born in Afghanistan. I took a conscious breath and realized the moment to ensure it is appreciated. It could disappear.

I politely acknowledged the gratitude that her family was safe. Our conversation was about another topic entirely and we had to focus on the work in front of us. There was a topic in medicine to discuss, a part of medical education to continue.

I was grateful for this young, female, Afghani medical student. I was happy to see her and know that twenty years made it possible for us to talk that day.

The balance of life, the balance of power and the teeter totter that a decision can bring created a moment of reflection in life.

SUZANNE RISKIN M.D.



- ▶ This piece was written on a casual day at work when there was not any particular event happening. I realized how much of an impact a decision made so far away from home could have on my personal growth as a medical educator.

AUTHOR STATEMENT



- ▶ Suzanne Riskin, M.D. is an Assistant Professor of Foundational Sciences at the Clearwater campus of NSU-KPCOM. She is interested in bringing narrative medicine to the curriculum because she is inspired by the works of her students. She received her B.A. from The University of Pennsylvania and her M.D. degree from The University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine. When she is not reviewing physiology and academic medicine materials she spends time visiting family and cooking chicken with paprika and lemon.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR