

## The worm is the hook

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There is little more disturbing than finding half of a worm in an apple. The degree of disturbance, however, is necessarily more profound when you are the inadvertent origin of the aforementioned worm.

I have been the cause of major vascular injury. The journey of reflection after such an incident has tested my understanding and expectations of what it means to grow as a person and a surgeon.

My memory of the day is more vivid than I would like. It was a cold January morning, the results of my STEP2 exam were to be released, and I had been given the opportunity to grow operatively while surrounded by valued colleagues and a respected mentor. A scarlet fountain morphed excitement into fear — then horror — then shame. I struggled to follow the pre-wrought pathways of reflection I learned in medical school — my support network of colleagues.

Much to the chagrin of some of my consultants, I have always been a talker. I enjoy the exploration of “How come?”, triangulating the root cause, evaluating systems and methods for flaws, and cutting out the dead wood. I went back to basics and my evaluation of proximate and ultimate factors seemed to boil down to a singular flaw. I was lacking. Over-confident, over-reliant, or over-burdened. Honest self-evaluation during germinating grief had given grievous moral injury.

Turning back to my old security blanket, I chased my self-evaluation in the company of others. I expected to learn from my mentors and from metrics. If I surrounded myself with great people, I would become great. If I unloaded self-reflection onto others, the experiences of my mentors could act as gospel.

Choices were easier when others acted as the divine judge of my actions.

I felt myself stagnating both professionally and personally as I externalized my locus of control. Work had become less compelling, and I didn't understand why I was floundering. Slowly, positive feedback felt akin to platitudes as I lost my sense of independence. In attempting to immerse myself in the community around me, I saw myself acting as a pseudo-intellectual, failing to grapple with disparate advice from colleagues with disparate experiences. My inability to independently evaluate myself acted as a ceiling for my growth.

It was only through the slow accumulation of forced moments of solitude that I began to appreciate the perspective granted by the discomfort of coping alone. To be clichéd, I started chasing the journey, but more specifically, the opportunity to come to my own conclusions about my own experiences. I found that although safety can be obtained externally, a sense of control originates internally. Instead of looking for success (as defined by the powers that be), I sought opportunities to fail and grow by my own estimation. Through fortune or design, that growth reinforced a sense of self-efficacy.

As I complete my residency, I still do not crave a bite into the unexpected worm, but I appreciate the use of each half. The first piece of worm is ready to be cast as I spit it out of my mouth, catching the opportunity to re-evaluate my methods and systems with colleagues. The second half, however, takes purposeful time. In wrenching the worm out, I understand the apple, the worm, and the situation that led to my stomach-churning meal. I had expected my journey as the “second-victim” of complications to be anchored in a place where I could find solace, but it was only by wrestling alone in places I fear that I began to find closure.