

The glass tunnel

Alan Cheng

Division of Urology, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada

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The walk from the parking structure to the hospital takes four minutes. I know because I have counted. Each morning, I walk through a glass-walled tunnel suspended above the street — protein shake in hand, pager clipped, the weight of a new day already settling into my shoulders. In the early months of residency, I kept my eyes fixed forward, fixed on the entrance doors ahead. I never looked through the glass.

I did not think of myself as someone who struggled with wellness. I had, after all, trained for this. I survived years of school, attended mandatory wellness sessions, and filed away the advice about self-care into a mental drawer I planned to open later. Later, of course, never came. Instead, there were post-call mornings that bled into afternoons, families waiting for consultation while I rehearsed operative risks, and the particular silence of patients who had just received a life-altering diagnosis.

I searched for wellness the way I had been taught. In weekends that rarely materialized, in exercise routines abandoned after long days, in meal-prepped lunches that went untouched. I wanted wellness to be a destination, something I could reach if I was disciplined enough, organized enough, resilient enough; however, resilience alone began to feel like an instruction to endure rather than to live.

What no one told me — what I had to discover along the way — was that respite is not a reward waiting at the end of a difficult stretch. It is woven into the fabric of every day at the hospital itself, once you learn to see it.

I found it in the early mornings. The coffee runs after rounds — the quiet deliberation over whether today warranted a breakfast sandwich too. A small decision, but an entirely necessary one. I found it at the scrub sink, where my mentors and I developed the particular shorthand of people who have stood side by side through difficult operations. A glance before entering a room with a complicated case. A shared exhale when something hard resolved nicely. I found it in the night shift workers who kept running jokes to survive overnight shifts, and in the colleagues who learned my name in the first week and used it every time. I began to look forward to those minutes. They cost nothing and asked nothing in return.

None of these moments appeared in any wellness framework I had encountered. They were not scheduled or curated. They were residency at the granular level — unglamorous, unannounced, real.

There is a version of this training that asks you to absorb hardship through sheer force of character. Resilience as armor. But armor is heavy, and it eventually isolates you from the very things that make the work meaningful. What I learned — slowly, and not without cost — is that respite is not mutually exclusive from hard work. It is embedded in hard work, in the moments when you stop striding through the tunnel long enough to look through the glass.

Because after all, the tunnel is glass. I walk through it every morning, and for a long time I did not let myself see that it is surrounded by light — morning light, low and gold, reflecting off the parkade levels and the street below. I was too focused on where I was going to notice where I was.

Residency demands resilience. But it offers something quieter in return — the small, genuine moments that constitute life: a laugh at a scrub sink, a coffee before dawn, the pride of a difficult thing done well. The destination matters. But so does the walk. Look at the glass.