



Melanie Donnelly

I have found myself spending quite a bit of time reflecting back on my life as my oldest enters his senior year of high school and my youngest his last year of middle school. I'm proud of the decisions my husband and I have made, and how we have provided our children with opportunities that continue to help them grow into the best version of themselves. It wasn't the easiest path to present, and I know at times it was an outright battle to get here.

From this moment, as I look back at the me of younger years, I find more language to help explain what was present, what was lacking, and what I can learn about myself by watching the younger me in action.

My baby B was welcomed into the world about 7 weeks prior to what we all expected. I had just started my first year of residency after a gen surg internship. The delivery was chaotic and I remember only bits and pieces of it. B was rushed off to the neonatal ICU after delivery where he spent his first 3 weeks of life. Part of that time on a ventilator and part of it learning how to feed and grow. I took time off and returned to my residency exhausted and barely ready to learn. B was still so little and there were still so many obstacles to him eating or breastfeeding and me learning how to use a breast pump. Inadequacy is the best way to describe how I felt for B's entire first year of life, both at home and at work. I was committed to feeding B breastmilk, especially given his difficult start to life. This required me to isolate on all breaks so I could pump. Interacting with fellow residents was a rarity outside of educational activities. At around 9 months of age, it was discovered that B had hydrocephalus and he had surgery....actually 2 surgeries a month apart. This was so disruptive to both my life and my training, and to my poor baby. I had no true idea what the implications of this would be for his life and I was worried for him. I was

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barely able to worry about me and how I was doing in my training program and really, I just tried to take it day by day and keep my head above water for the time being.

B began to thrive following his second shunt surgery and both he and I were headed onto a steady ladder of improvement. He received therapy to catch up on milestones, and I finally had a little bit of space to breathe, pause and study!!!

The most important resources for me during this time were my fellow mom residents. They understood my crazy thoughts and feelings, and we eventually formed a regular study group. We met in the wee hours of the morning while our kids were sleeping and the OR's weren't yet gearing up for the day. My program faculty exhibited super-human patience with me as well. This support was critical, and I can't overemphasize how important a supportive, caring, and honest program director was during this time. I understood when I was behind, and I also had all the belief I could improve and at least come close to catching up. That belief, in part, stemmed from the confidence my program director exhibited in my capability. What a gift!

I am dumbfounded when I consider how this young trainee managed to have this premature baby and successfully complete residency. All that on so little sleep.... how? All that with so much less....how? All those difficulties and yet I recall that time as one the most cherished of my life

Maybe before she had the vocabulary or insight to verbalize it, she did know something about finding joy in the moment? Maybe she had grit before it was something we spoke about? And maybe she had the right support at the right time from the right people?

For now, I am doing my best to continue to find joy intentionally in my life each day. Connection to my kids, my spouse, my family, my friends...this feeds my soul and I continue to work on how to create more of this. Living in gratitude for me means appreciating the path that young woman, my former self, created for my life. It means appreciating the emphasis she placed on her baby B and the commitment she kept to become a doctor and complete training in order to craft the life I can live today.

I live my life today in hopes that my future self can reflect back someday and be proud of the path I choose now....