

A Journey Toward Mindfulness

By Kelsey Robinson, SPT

Congratulations to Neumann University Doctor of Physical Therapy Program graduate student Kelsey Robinson, SPT, the winner of the annual physical therapy student essay contest co-sponsored by the ACAPT Consortium for the Humanities, Ethics, and Professionalism (CHEP) and JHR. This writing competition is designed to encourage deep thinking by students about the role and value of humanities, ethics, and professionalism in academic training and professional life. The fourth in an annual series, the CHEP-JHR essay contest offers a creative opportunity to ignite critical reflection in PT students across the nation, to support holistic approaches to patient care. This year's essay prompt was, "2020 is defined by crises and uncertainties related to the COVID-19 pandemic and racial tensions. These impact the moral, social, political and economic foundations of our world, nation, and the profession of physical therapy. Navigating one's professional identity and formation during this time is undoubtedly challenging, and you may have had unexpected, yet impactful interactions as a result. Describe an experience that significantly impacted your professional growth and identity as a future physical therapist, with respect to the public health crises of racism and/or COVID-19. What about this encounter was instructive? In what ways did this experience enlighten your perspective on one or more of the core values of our profession?"

In her essay, A Journey Toward Mindfulness, Ms. Robinson reminds us that while we cannot fully understand someone else's steps through life, we can "validate life through [our] own shoes.

Whether embellished with privilege or stained by tribulations, reflecting on one's own life experiences will uncover biases, personal revelation, and the means to navigate life as a part of shared humanity."

"Competitive programs [in health care] are trying so hard to diversify their students that now the application process is unfair. People of color are getting accepted into these programs simply because they are diverse but do not have the qualifications beyond that. Now it is harder for the majority [white males] to stand out in comparison even if they are more qualified."

This was told to me by a fellow physical therapy student, and immediately my spirit was drained. I felt my blood begin to boil—not with anger, but in shame. I wanted to speak, but my mouth did not move beyond a smile as I held back tears. I am that person of color that my fellow colleague was referring to: an African American and single mother with a dream of becoming a physical therapist. I thought, "I must not be good enough; maybe I am their charity case."

THE ALMOST-IMPOSSIBLE JOURNEY

That comment exposed my deep-rooted insecurities, as I do not fit the image of a 'stereotypical' physical therapist. Only 5% of physical therapists are African American; thus, one can imagine this journey to

achieve a doctoral degree feels impossible at times. The worst part about this encounter is that I allowed an outside influence to belittle my own self-worth. Responding to these comments, as confrontational as it may seem, was an opportunity to educate another on the importance and value of increased diversity in health care. Yet I said nothing.

My silence was not a reflection of how that colleague viewed me but of how I viewed myself: an imposter, undeserving to be part of this program. I consider this encounter an act of implicit racism that rendered me silent as I felt devalued to the point of voicelessness. This was not my first time experiencing such feelings, and each time produced a suppurating, invisible wound that diminished my own self-worth and value, leading me to question who I am and what I do. I thought I had matured and healed from those wounds but I began to ask myself, “Did I heal or simply force myself to forget them?”

Recent racial injustices are shedding new light on societal issues that have been present for years; the physical therapy profession is acknowledging this injustice by working to improve diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in our *profession*. The quote, “To walk a mile in someone’s shoes” admonishes us not to judge and exclude others until you understand their experiences and point of view. Although helpful, I know it is impossible to fully understand someone else’s steps through life.

Therefore, I suggest validating life through your *own* shoes. Whether embellished with privilege or stained by tribulations, reflecting on one’s own life experiences will uncover biases, personal revelation, and the means to navigate life as a part of shared humanity.

FINDING MY VOICE

A common phrase is to “dress for the job you want and not the job you have.” My skin, hair, verbiage, and culture are the garments that I can’t take off—nor should I want to, despite stigma from some members of society. That stigma puts a heavy burden on your mental health when you start to believe it as truth. I know there are many people like myself—struggling with insecurities, racism, prejudice, and self-acceptance—so, when I received an opportunity to speak on these topics, I was elated.

I accepted an invitation to speak to 11th and 12th grade girls at a local high school about health and wellness, diversity, physical therapy, and my own journey of how I overcame mental, physical, emotional, and financial challenges in order to get to where I am today. In the process, I found my voice.

I used to be embarrassed and disappointed about my *shoes*: they’re dented, stained, and well-worn. However, now I know that the value they hold is based on what they are used for and not what they look like. No longer silent, my words to the students helped to heal my psychic wounds as a shared experience for others like myself. My hope is for those reading this narrative reflection to appreciate the long-term consequences that implicit racism has on one’s self-worth and self-identity, and the importance of speaking up when confronted by racist remarks, even when those remarks are unintended.

DIVERSITY AND ALTRUISM

I am not a charity case and my diversity is predicated less on the color of my skin than on my own unique sense of being in the world. To respect others, and even love others for who they are and not how they look fosters a process of introspection and acceptance

and even celebration of one's *own* self worth. To know this is to know altruism, compassion, professional duty and social responsibility as core values of the physical therapy profession.

My deep-rooted insecurities were resurfaced by the trigger quoted at the beginning of this narrative. When left unaddressed, it was impacting my ability to communicate, advocate, empathize, and provide quality care. Finding self-acceptance and speaking up for my own identity has brought healing.

Somebody needs to see your face, hear your story, and heal from your interventions. Someone needs you. Remain steadfast in who you are and what you've been through, because even the trials you face today will become your strength tomorrow as a clinician.

About the Author



Kelsey Robinson, SPT lives in Vineland, New Jersey. She is currently enrolled as a third-year physical therapy student at Neumann University and will begin her terminal affiliations with pediatric and outpatient sports medicine facilities this year. When not studying, she enjoys crafting, baking, and spending time with family.