

Chair's Reflection - Faculty Council meeting, Sept 2021

Octavian ('Tavi') Ioachimescu

This month marks the 20th anniversary of the attacks of Sept 11th 2001, a day that will live in infamy. The same as the day of the attack on Pearl Harbor, of which probably very few of us remember for the simple reason that we were not born yet. The fact of the matter is that more people died on 9/11/2001 than on 12/7/1941.

I am sure though, all of you remember where you were and what you were doing at the time when the September 11th 2001 attacks happened. I was a medical resident in the Yale system, during a Pulmonary and Critical Care rotation at West Haven Veteran Affairs Hospital. We were rounding in the Intensive Care Unit when the attacks happened. We saw the towers coming down in short succession, from two different patient rooms, during rounding. One of the patients was well enough to watch the attacks live on television, while still receiving mechanical ventilation through a tracheostomy tube. By noon, he requested that the medical team come back to his room and asked to be disconnected from the ventilator. In his written message on a board, with a visible tremor in the scribbled letters, he wrote: "I don't want to live anymore.", followed by: "This is NOT why I fought for US." We did not let him die. He died anyway three weeks later. Nobody counted him as a victim of 09/11.

I remember that we were getting ready to stay overnight to receive from New York City the transfers of all wounded who needed medical care. No one came.

Now I am a staff physician at Emory University – School of Medicine, practicing in the Atlanta Veteran Affairs Healthcare system. I am proud to be serving the veterans of this country. Towards the tail end of the 2008 Great Recession, for a number of reasons, homelessness became rampant among veterans. One day, somebody showed me a program by which one can help a homeless veteran: enrolling into a routine of doing 10 push-ups five times a day, recording the videos and then posting them online, then an organization would donate for each person doing this for two weeks a house for a veteran. It felt like a personal challenge with a noble cause, so I enrolled. I found a number of exercise fans at the gym who embraced the challenge with a lot of enthusiasm. Interestingly, in about one year the Veterans Affairs Administration reported that they were no more homeless

veterans in the entire country. Not our doing or this program's - I am sure, but many people got energized by various interventions and solved this serious problem together. Some of the folks at the gym not only did it for 2 weeks, but modified their goal over time to do 50 push-ups in one stretch. They decided that continuing it every day would hopefully and somehow help a veteran keep their home. Some are still doing 50 push-ups every day - this sounds like a lot, doesn't it? Well, I am not sure anymore...

I like reading books. Between 2016 and 2020, I used to borrow from the library roughly one book a month. Audiobook or in print, didn't matter. The last book I borrowed from the library was one called 'Resilience', written by Steven M. Southwick and Dennis S. Charney. This was in February of 2020. I have not returned it yet. Because the pandemic that ensued gave me the time, motivation and inclination to read this book in more detail, multiple times: it talks about the mechanisms that make us stronger in the face of adversity.

Among other examples, the book talks about the experience of some prisoners of war in Vietnam, years after the war ended. They were living in very difficult conditions, they were severely malnourished, treated horribly and tortured often. Nobody in the US knew that they were still alive. One of the first resistive mechanisms that they learned was how to communicate with each other in-between cells, by a new, tapping secret code. They understood that communicating with each other was an essential survival mechanism. Second, they came up with a system of building physical and physiological endurance, by which they were competing against each other in various challenges, whenever multiple people shared a cell. They knew that if they were able to sustain one of these challenges, they would likely have the stamina to survive and to, one day, go back home. One contest that they devised was based on who does more push-ups. They were very harsh on each other and would appoint umpires to ensure that each push-up was complete before being counted. The winner of the contest had... 501 push-ups in one stretch. This teaches us all humility, doesn't it?

The reason I am telling you this story is to remind ourselves with humility that during a pandemic that still challenges our lives so fundamentally, being adaptive and flexible, building resilience, working on our wellbeing and wellness, avoiding personal and professional burnout should be amongst the most important mechanisms to develop, refine and apply relentlessly. Let this academic year be under the auspices of communicating better with each other, building together

the mechanisms that will allow us not only to survive, but to stay healthy and to overcome all challenges, being stronger, becoming more resilient and better at what we do every day.