

dear residents

Two Voices

July 26, 2026

Dear Residents,

I was raised by parents with very different personalities, and only with time have I come to appreciate how much they shaped the way I think.

My father was a classic member of the Silent Generation. He attended medical school during World War II, completed his surgical training in the United Kingdom after the war, and practiced through an era in which resources were scarce and mistakes often carried irreversible consequences. Frugality, caution, and discipline were woven into his character. He never let me ride a motorcycle. Before every trip he prepared meticulous travel checklists, anticipating every conceivable problem. Even today, I still make those same lists and, by nature, remain fairly risk averse. If I were to describe his inner voice, it would be a *protective* one. A voice that continually asked, *What shouldn't we do? What could go wrong?*

My mother was almost his opposite. She was a free spirit. She welcomed unusual people into her life, stood up for those who were vulnerable even when it carried personal risk, challenged authority when she believed it was wrong, and approached life with an infectious sense of optimism and adventure. Her instinct was always to encourage rather than restrain. Her inner voice was *promotive*. It asked, *What could we create? What becomes possible if we try?*

Over the years I have realized that I carry both voices within me. Like my father, I value preparation, structure, and thoughtful planning. Like my mother, I am drawn to curiosity, questioning assumptions, and imagining better possibilities. I have come to believe that wisdom lies not in choosing one voice over the other, but in knowing when each deserves to be heard.

Medicine naturally amplifies the protective voice. We have protocols, checklists, policies, regulations, competency assessments, supervision requirements, duty hour rules, informed consent, quality metrics, and countless other safeguards. Almost all of them exist for good reasons. They prevent errors, protect patients, and remind us that caution is one of medicine's greatest virtues.

Yet there is another voice that deserves equal attention.

UT Southwestern has become one of the world's leading academic medical centers not simply because it avoids mistakes, but because it continually asks what is possible. Scientific discovery depends on curiosity, creativity, and the willingness to challenge accepted ideas. Researchers take intellectual risks. They pursue questions whose answers are uncertain. Innovation begins with someone asking, *What if we did this differently?*

Although patient care and scientific discovery operate under different constraints, I increasingly believe that the healthiest organizations cultivate both voices.

When caring for a critically ill patient, the protective voice often deserves center stage. When designing a curriculum, improving a workflow, conducting research, or imagining a better residency experience, the promotive voice may be the one that moves us forward.

As physicians, you will spend your careers hearing both voices. Learn to recognize them. Ask yourself whether you are declining an idea because it is genuinely unsafe or simply because it is unfamiliar. Ask whether a rule exists to protect patients or merely to preserve tradition.

The strongest organizations understand that both are indispensable. They use compliance to protect what matters most, but they rely on trust to unleash curiosity, innovation, and the courage to improve. They know that lasting excellence comes not from asking only, *"How do we prevent failure?"* but also, *"How do we make something better?"*

As you move through your careers, you will undoubtedly become experts in identifying risk. I hope you also become people who recognize opportunity, who are willing to ask difficult questions, who imagine better ways of caring for patients, teaching learners, and improving the systems around you. Medicine needs both voices. The art of leadership is knowing when to listen to each.

Warmly,

Dino