

THE BackPages

Viewpoint

Contents

378

ESSAY

Keeping the NHS on course: politicians' proposals for the next 4 years

Roger Jones

381

ESSAY

Peace within a password

Elizabeth Ingall

381

The fallacy of Van Helmont's tree

Mike Fitzpatrick

382

ESSAY

Knowing me, Knowing you: personality and peer appraisal

Jill Murie

384

ESSAY

There's no such thing as flexible training for GP trainees

Samir Dawlatly

385

ESSAY

Restricting minor surgery in general practice: another example of financial short-termism

Edin Lakasing

387

ESSAY

The overgrown garden

Peter Davies

388

To whom it may concern

Helen Lester

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING A DOCTOR

The graduates stand like flock's of crows on a line, their capes billowing in the breeze, their bright faces squinting into cameras under the peaks of dressing-up-box mortar boards. These are our young doctors. Six years at university and finally the prefix is theirs. What pride and achievement! However, the pomp and self-congratulation of graduation day is the carefully gilded surface of a profession in something of an existential crisis. While we may know how to perform our role, we do not really understand it, and even less so, understand ourselves.

Studying for yet another exam, my eyes stray from my textbooks towards a dog-eared copy of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera.¹ Written in 1984, it is at once a philosophical discussion of the nature of the 20th century 'being', and a novel of love, infidelity and politics in communist-run Czechoslovakia between 1968 and the early 1980s. While I had always admired its astute observations about relationships, the central philosophical themes of 'lightness' and 'weight' caught my imagination this time, opening up a framework to explore my own dissatisfaction with my 'Doctor' role. Kundera's themes of 'lightness' and 'weight' derive from Nietzsche's theory of eternal return which posits that the changing nature of the universe means that every state of the world could recur ad-infinitum, trapping us within a type of fate, something Nietzsche proclaimed a terrifying, 'weighty' burden. Kundera describes its opposite, 'lightness', as causing man to 'become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant.'

The main characters, Tomas and Sabina (his mistress), are characterised by 'lightness' – they don't ally themselves to political parties, traditional morality, a single sexual partner, or even a job role. In comparison, Tomas' long-term girlfriend, Tereza, is a 'heavy' character, she cannot accept the unbearable lightness of being and seeks to attach meaning and 'weight' to what she considers important in life.

So how could 'lightness' and 'weight' aid me in an attempt to understand myself and my role as a doctor better? My first thought was that I was finding embodying the role of 'Doctor' difficult because I had made it too 'heavy'. The romanticised image of the vocation fits poorly with its reality as a depersonalised conveyor-belt education: many students lose faith in their ability

to be creative, convincing themselves that the only acceptable way to be is textbook medic – knowledgeable and yet bereft of individuality. I, along with many of my colleagues, trapped myself under the burden, or 'weight' of this idea of a doctor that has no personal meaning. Since this sort of internal conflict only leads to unhappiness, perhaps we might all be better abandoning the weighty notions of 'the doctor'.

Why do we cling to such notions of our role? Supposedly because to not do so would mean admitting that it is arbitrarily irrelevant whether we become doctors or not. But still, as one critic says, 'The unbearable aspect of lightness is the hollow feeling one gets after having been compelled by weight to act in a self-sacrificial manner that promises deeper contentment, but yields no tangible results except a warm fuzzy feeling of moral right-standing, which is an unlikely consolation'.² So, in clinging to weighty ideals of the doctor role, we are still left with this unbearably poor consolation.

Of course, what explains our own feelings and behaviour, explains our patients' too. Some of our patients may lead 'heavy' lives, full of ties and with a sense of inevitability, such as Tereza. Some may lead 'light' lives without attaching themselves to anything or anyone. These distinctions in life philosophy are augmented at times of illness, pain and distress and must be important considerations for us as we treat people.

Kundera has no clear resolution but comments that:

'Without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in times of great distress.'

What matters most, Kundera says, is the journey of human experience that allows us to find meaning and significance in things that others might have found insignificant or weightless. As the charades of career progression play on year after year, I shall remember this and ensure that once the hoops are jumped, I make my career my own, and learn to bear the lightness of being.

Georgina Fozard

REFERENCES

1. Kundera M. *The unbearable lightness of being*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1984.
2. Vitsha X. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. <http://www.shvoong.com/books/136597-unbearable-lightness/> (accessed 12 Apr 2010).

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp10X501967