Friday morning. July 23. 5:24 am. I woke invigorated to the fertility of the day. The thrusting rays of sun just broke past the eastern horizon, merging with the crisp breeze off Lake Michigan, carrying the fresh scents of prairie blossoms. The forecast called for clear skies and warm temperatures across the plains. Excited, I knew my direction and what the day ahead meant. After a quick run along the park followed by a quick shower, I put on my favorite pair of ripped blue jeans, a white v-neck t-shirt, my Wyoming boots, and of course, Ray-Ban sunglasses. I left the apartment with an overnight sack carrying only mini-mal gear, crossed the street to the Dunkin Donuts, grabbed a large cup of coffee with one pump of cream and three sugars. I threw the sack in the trunk, hopped in the car, put the top down, placed the car in sport mode, and put on Chicago’s Country Music station 99.5 FM. I screeched out of my garage and immediately turned south on to Lake Shore Drive, aiming toward Highway 55, aka Route 66.

Where I was going was still to be determined and it really didn’t matter... it was the journey I was more interested in not the destination...

Physicians are goal oriented, and it starts early. Study hard to get into college, study harder to get into medical school, then study and work hard to get a good residency, impress to get a fellowship, impress even more to get a good job, and so on. Clinically we are taught to find the cure, cut out the tumor, erase the wrinkle. Personally, we are encouraged to make money, get a house, have a kid, save for retirement... but wait a second! What about taking a moment to reflect on the journey?

THE RETURN OF THE JEDI...PHYSICIAN

There are few to any professions that require so many continuous years of consistent hard work and dedication as medicine. We become programmed to achieve goals and deliver results. But we rarely, if ever, are taught about
the importance of recognizing, appreciating, and learning from the moments along the way. The skills, disciplines, and friendships gained from endless nights of studying, taking in-house calls, working 36-hour shifts are priceless and likely contribute to the core of what makes us competent decision makers. Clinically, we are trained with an emphasis that skips over managing the pathology in favor of quickly defining the target, determining a solution, and then shooting to cure. In aesthetics, we are trained to see a wrinkle, find a fold, uncover the fat deposit and choose the product, toxin, or device that will best achieve a 2-point improvement. In all cases, we are positioned to look past the patient and their needs. However, stepping back for a moment allows for clarity. It opens up space to think beyond the spoon-fed electronic medical record-guided diagnosis and evidence-based medicine treatment protocols. An equanimity ensues, and a Jedi physician is the result.

After years of intense schooling and goal-oriented training, the imaginative and non-linear part of our thinking can become dormant or even snuffed out completely. Physicians trained in a militant hierarchal manner are encouraged to not challenge conventional wisdom. Along the way, character traits of trustworthiness, competency, loyalty, and reliability are gained, all being necessary requisites to the profession. But the yin to that yang is the loss of spontaneity, creativity and a tendency toward risk-averse robotic thinking, and eventual burnout. Many find their love for medicine rekindled during a vacation. Time to relax, catch up on reading or other interest often leads to creative insights that translates into career betterment. But let’s be honest, even vacations today are greatly pre-planned, devoid of risk, and mapped out months in advance. All can recount some of their greatest opportunities for learning, relationship building, or professional advancement happened when least expected. It is during the unplanned situation or journey that we are forced to be resourceful and receptive. The challenge of the unknown combined with a push outside of our comfort zone leads to an initial uncomfortableness followed by a presence of mind and personal growth.

ON THE ROAD, AGAIN
To allow myself better appreciation for the journey, each summer I choose a random weekend in which I clear my schedule for a road trip. The essential element, though, is that I have no particular destination in mind. I only know that I will wake up on Friday morning, check the forecast, and drive in whichever direction the road and sun take me. Last year I found myself in Nauvoo, IL, a place of importance to the Church of Latter Day Saints. Following the murder of John Smith, Brigham Young led his congregation’s exodus across a frozen river on their way to their ultimate home in Utah. The year before I found myself listening to banjo music on a paddle boat steering down the Mississippi River in Hannibal, MO, a town that still lives in the 1840s. It also happens to be the home town of Mark Twain. The year before I found myself in Deward, a small ghost town in central Michigan, which at the turn of the Twentieth century was one of the most important logging towns in the Midwest. Other years I have ended up on Kentucky’s Bourbon Trail, spent a night in Mackinaw Island’s famed Grand Hotel, rode the Fenelon place cable car in Dubuque, IA, and much more. Within six hours of Chicago I have explored state parks, caves, rock, and the boyhood homes of Presidents Grant, Lincoln, Reagan, Harrison and other noted dignitaries with Midwestern roots. Most years I travel alone. Some years I invite another who shares my romanticized passion for the journey. But all years I am greeted on the road with warm welcomes and friendly waves. I’ve grown to love country music, buttered grits, and bottomless cups of coffee from diners in one-stop towns. Barbeque competitions, state fairs, fireworks, and listening to music while sitting on the hood of my car are fairly routine, but most importantly, I gain an appreciation for the journey, which is pregnant with potential and teased by the unknown. Another benefit to driving the open road is the inherent incompatibility with social media. The mobile phone is down. It forces time to think and gain inspiration and perspective on a career and life. And if with another, whether it be spouse, child, friend, cousin, or budding romantic interest, you are in a closed, no way-out situation—the ideal set-up for communicating through any dilemma, project, or inspiring dream together. And as a by-product, two people can really get to know each other.

While road tripping may not be for everyone, we all have an opportunity to set up our own version of a journey without a destination. Perhaps go to the airport with bags packed and choose where to go after getting to the airport, or if living in a city, begin a trek following the little green man in the light, never stopping. See where the walks lead. If in the suburbs, how about taking one road till it ends and then making alternative right and left turns until finding an interesting place? Or consider visiting a book store, closing your eyes, and pointing to a random book to read. Similarly with music, pick a genre never before appreciated. If with a group of friends, go to a non-traditional grocery store, randomly choose ingredients for one another, and see what unique gustatory delight can be created. There are endless ways—whether alone or with others—to foster a milieu of spontaneity, fun, and openness to new opportunities and thinking. The key is that there is no pre-planned destination, just a journey and a willingness to explore.

The brightness of life is built during the shades of the journey. Try it, see where it takes you.

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