



The Woman in the Arena

By Krystal Mills, MD

'The Man in the Arena' is a concept that has recurred throughout popular culture and has been featured in ad campaigns, movies such as *Invictus* and is even written on the sneakers of LeBron James before his basketball games. So, what is the origin of this phrase? It is from a passage in Teddy Roosevelt's speech formally titled *Citizenship in a Republic*. Personally, I was introduced to this concept by Dr. Brené Brown when I read her novel "Daring Greatly" titled after the last sentence in the excerpt from this speech. As a woman in medicine, I believe this excerpt parallels the experiences of so many of us and I'll share why but first I'd like to adjust the concept to be the 'The Woman* in the Arena'.

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong woman stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better..."*

As women in medicine, we navigate so many arenas each day. It may be in a patient's room during rounds, presenting in a lecture hall for a teaching session or a modern day zoom conference. The critics are always present in these spaces. For the most part, the solicited or unsolicited advice we are given are constructive and beneficial for professional and personal growth. However, as the excerpt states, when it comes to our journey the focus should never be on the persons sitting in our metaphorical arenas. It is easy to point out the faults in another person but not always so easy to be on the receiving end. This can create room for doubt or imposter syndrome, causing accomplished women to lose sight of their achievements. We must recognize the courage it takes to show up each day in these spaces in pursuit of our career goals and dreams. We must not only recognize this in ourselves, but in everyone else we encounter on their own journeys.

"The credit belongs to the woman who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends herself* in a worthy cause..."*

Self-celebration should be a common practice for women in medicine. The path we follow is often full of curves, bumps, sharp turns, detours; that we navigate with grace. One may end up with a microscopic view, solely focusing on meeting individual targets on this path. How about we pause and zoom out for a more macroscopic perspective? What targets have we met but missed an opportunity to celebrate? How long has it been since you appreciated the accomplishments that have taken you from the woman

you once were to the woman you are today? Let tomorrow be tomorrow. Take the time to celebrate you. Yes, someone may not approve of a woman's self-celebration but as we established earlier, this is not about the critics. You too deserve to be seen for your efforts in the arena, striving for your worthy cause.

"who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if she fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that her* place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat..."*

This reminds me of another concept from Dr. Brené Brown known as 'foreboding joy' which refers to the hesitation to lean in to true happiness because something may then go wrong. In medicine, the learning curve fluctuates and some days you feel as if you did everything right and on other days you feel you did everything wrong. It is easy to settle in that in between space to avoid disappointment but then you will deprive yourself of experiencing the fullness of joy. Accept that failure or shortcomings are inevitable and serve as lessons for the road ahead. Failure strengthens and enlightens. Persevering takes a courageous heart and strong mind. Congratulations on how much you have persevered, even on the days you did not realize it. To be a woman in medicine is to dare greatly. You have found a place amongst the courageous. Your courage has already inspired many seated in the arena and your courage will be your legacy.

Dr. Krystal Mills has explored scientific writing through scholarly activities but has loved creative writing as well as other forms of the creative and performing arts since a young age. Her clinical and research interests include health disparities and gastrointestinal metaplasia. She will begin her fellowship in gastroenterology and hepatology at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota after completing this year as chief resident at Morehouse School of Medicine. Dr. Mills is grateful for the opportunity to share her passion through the Susan Love Writing Competition.