

# Nurturing a Satisfying Career in Dermatology

Suzanne M. Olbricht, MD

The residents of our program asked me to serve as their commencement speaker in June. Since I was retiring from my position as department chair, this touching honor seemed a fitting capstone for my career. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on the enormity of the changes that have occurred between my graduation from residency in 1983 and the current time, which is marked by disruption from the digital revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this 40-year period, there were times of external global turmoil, economic instability, significant changes in the business of medicine, stressful changes in documentation of competency and certification, and the difficult transition to electronic medical records. Another epidemic—AIDS—changed surgical practices. During my residency, we did biopsies without wearing gloves or masks. Gloves were added to protect the person doing the procedure as well as to prevent spread of disease to other patients, not to reduce the infection rate for the patient undergoing the procedure. Of course, change in the last 40 years also occurred outside of work and included various familial stresses. The irritations of daily life easily mounted up to being overwhelming. However, I had gone to work every day for 40 years, seeking to do my best for my patients and my colleagues and the staff with whom I worked, sometimes feeling successful and sometimes feeling incompetent. Some days went smoothly, and some days were filled with challenges that I could not begin to imagine how I would solve. I have a habit of seeing problems rather than successes, which

creates its own difficulties. I did, however, grab opportunities that continually improved my practice of medicine and allowed me to serve in several professional positions as well as in leadership positions of multiple professional societies. As I prepared the commencement address, I realized that the totality of my career was very satisfying.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of *satisfying* is “producing pleasure or contentment by providing what is needed or wanted.”<sup>1</sup> My use of the word means that my career over the long term has pleased me—maybe not some of the people I reported to, but rather me.

My approach to my career can be summarized in 3 words: purpose, serendipity, and curiosity.

The first element is *purpose*. Job satisfaction generally is associated with work being aligned with values, an appreciation that you are accomplishing the purpose with which you set out on your journey. It is not associated with every day being wonderful and problem free or every task being completed without setbacks or complications. The reality of working is not that every moment brings pure happiness or that every task fulfills a passion. How does a person ensure that the days add up to be satisfying? Start with values. Why did you decide to pursue medical school? Some may have chosen it for economic security, but there are many ways to achieve economic security. Maybe being a physician feeds into the family lore, but families generally have broad ranges of acceptable careers. Maybe it appealed scientifically, but a PhD in biology also fulfills that interest. Maybe it is that you noticed respect

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From Lahey Clinic, Burlington, Massachusetts.

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Correspondence: Suzanne M. Olbricht, MD, Department of Dermatology, Lahey Clinic, 1 Essex Center Dr, Peabody, MA 01960.

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for physicians in the community when you were growing up, but that is changing and does not represent an internal value anyway. Consider your values carefully, write them down, and keep them at the forefront of the day. Go back to them consciously any time you have a rough day and understand why you are doing what you are doing. When you are 55 years old and going through your umpteenth change in reimbursement process, go back to the day you decided on medicine as a career. Focus on your values as the grounding for your purpose. Also note that purpose is different than goals. Some goals will be reached, and some will not. Goals change with external realities and/or internal factors. Purpose and values remain the same if we have thoughtfully identified them.

The second element is *serendipity*. Serendipity often is thought of as luck, as karma, as being in the right place at the right time. It feels random, and at first glance it appears that purpose and serendipity are complete opposites and do not intersect. Serendipity is, however, not just luck. It is an ability to distinguish events and observations in meaningful ways. It is a close relative of creativity and benefits from sloppiness, playfulness, tinkering, and discussion. It cannot exist in a vacuum. History is replete with serendipitous discoveries. It is thought that James Watson and Francis Crick would never have been able to elucidate the nature of DNA without sharing offices with people with whom they argued daily. In fact, figuring out the DNA structure was not even the main focus of their laboratories. It was just a side angle that several people loved to think about. Appreciating serendipity by being truly open to opportunities that are out on the wings brings experiences that are deeply rewarding even if not planned. I had no idea at all, no plan, no goal of serving as president of the American Academy of Dermatology or as Department Chair, and yet these happened. These experiences have allowed me to work on my purpose as I have defined it. How can you harness serendipity in your own life? My philosophy may be somewhat simple, but I think if you show up every day doing the best job you can at the tasks on hand, doors will appear, at odd intervals and in odd directions. You must be open enough and in tune with your purpose to an extent that you can sense the direction in which to turn and what doorways through which to walk.

The third element is *curiosity*. One definition is that curiosity is the motivation to learn new information. Another definition is that curiosity is a special form of

information seeking distinguished by the fact that it is internally motivated. We are all familiar with intellectual curiosity. For example, a patient has a basal cell carcinoma on the upper back. What does the literature say about the cure rates of various treatments for that particular tumor? In addition, we can be curious about other things as well. Is it a really small tumor? How was it found and why is the patient anxious? Why does it make me irritated that the patient is worried about such a small, easily treated tumor? Or is it a large neglected tumor? Why was it not treated before? Why does it make me sad that it is so large? Why does it annoy me that I have a difficult situation to manage? Being able to define an emotional reaction by being curious about its presence helps us manage destructive responses and promote more positive outcomes. This curiosity is related to emotional intelligence and is mindfully harnessed by effective leaders. Curiosity will get you through tough days when your office team is stressed and the tough years that are complicated by professional and personal challenges.

Curiosity also will help you identify your purpose and harness serendipity, and so we come full circle with our 3 elements: purpose, serendipity, and curiosity.

My wish for all of you is that when you are at the tail end of your career, you will look back and say, "This has been a great ride." I am very grateful that I can acknowledge this for myself. I have been so fortunate to have found dermatology, where I can go to work every day making a difference for patients in a stimulating environment with good colleagues. One of my values is to try and make life better in some way for everyone around me, even if it is just a smile at the start of the workday. As I look back, this value has allowed me to meet interesting people, hear fascinating stories, make good friends, and have enduring relationships. I have held onto fellow travelers, and we have supported each other through tough times as well as celebrated together the good times.

Nurturing a satisfying career includes these essential fundamentals. First, accept the reality of constant change. Second, develop productive relationships with fellow travelers. And third and most importantly, go forth with purpose, serendipity, and curiosity.

#### REFERENCE

1. Merriam-Webster. Satisfying. *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*. Accessed November 18, 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/satisfying>