Ladders, Legos, and Life: A Story of My Experiences

The metal ladder in my hand felt cold. "Should have grabbed my thicker gloves," I told myself with every step over the uneven glacier. I had no time to look for them when the Sherpa knocked and yelled, "Doctors, help! My friend hurt." Truthfully, I did not expect to be out that long in the subzero Himalayan night. The Sherpa's friend was an experienced climber unsuccessfully attempting to climb Mt. Pumori. He had broken his leg on a fall, gotten frostbite during the rescue, and now had cerebral edema. The backpack frame that had hours earlier carried his gear now provided traction for his femur. The climbing rope that caught his fall now tied him to his stretcher, the metal ladder in my hand.

One false move, one moment of inattention and all the power he had as a climber disappeared. It was my fascination with this delicate balance between strength and fragility that has twice led me to Nepal. I have seen firsthand the possibilities and defeats of the human body and aligned these experiences with my goals as a future surgeon. What I discovered is that the specialty of orthopaedics is not surgery of the extremities, but the art of restoring life. Through my patients, I saw in myself the ability to offer back strength, to return motion, and to recover function. I saw myself as an Orthopaedic Surgeon.

This realization became clear to me in the mountains of Nepal, but the decision was an evolution that began long ago. Lego building blocks as a child were my first introduction to engineering, then came the integration of mechanics and movement with robotics in high school, and eventually human biomechanics as an engineer in college. With these courses I learned to see the body in a new and amazing way. Engineering enabled me to envision muscles not as simple contractile tissues, but as the motors for the pulleys that move our bones. Biomechanics made bones evolve from static connectors into the dynamic moment-arms of life. This fascination with the human body drives my interest in orthopaedics and, coupled with my love of patients and surgery, will provide me with a career of continuous discovery and fulfillment.

Continuous development is an age-old theme in Orthopaedic Surgery. Broken bones have been treated by immobilization for thousands of years, yet the field continues to evolve. Arthroscopy, nerve transfers, and, in due time, stem cells will radically change old techniques and establish new standards of care. These innovations both improve patient outcomes while demanding an increased level of skill and technique from the surgeon. Throughout my educational career I have demonstrated the aptitude and motivation necessary to keep abreast of this expanding knowledge base. Additionally, as a lifelong athlete and engineer, I have developed the coordination, dexterity, and three dimensional spatial relationship skills required to succeed in complex, innovative surgeries. As the field of Orthopaedic Surgery continues to change, I look forward to taking part in such advancement. I anticipate combining my interest in surgery, my devotion to patient care, and my engineering background into a career that includes surgery, research, and biodevice development.

Now I begin a lifelong commitment to learning the art of Orthopaedic Surgery. As I look forward to residency I am captivated by the excitement of the adventure to come. I envision residency as a place to offer my experiences to patients and colleagues in exchange for their trust and gifts of knowledge. I bring with me lessons of integrity from my parents and lessons of courage from my sister, Leigh, who lives with severe cerebral palsy. I bring a genuine commitment to patients and their families. I bring confidence and potential, balanced with laughter and humility. I bring an understanding of the impact of Orthopaedic Surgery from my experiences, including that seminal night in Nepal. I bring all of myself, and in return I will be given the lifelong responsibility of perfecting and advancing the art of Orthopaedic Surgery.