

Salah Khidir Abdelgadir

Between Silence and Purpose

It was a warm June afternoon when I sat across from my therapist, trying to explain why I hadn't been sleeping. Lately, I'd wake just before dawn – my body alert, my mind aimless.

It had been a week since I completed my health equity fellowship. Finally—seven years after arriving on the metaphorical shores of these United States, after the long stretch of medical training that included an internal medicine residency, an infectious disease fellowship, and a short lifetime of experience—I had time. Not a few hours tucked between shifts. Not a weekend. Time.

And with it, a strange restlessness.

No patients waiting.

No urgent messages.

No back-to-back meetings or checklists to power through.

Just stillness. And in that stillness, I found myself adrift.

So, I returned to books. I picked up *The Brothers Karamazov*¹, a novel I'd long meant to read. I'd start each day with two quiet hours, coffee in hand, my ever-hungry cat Simba curled beside me. Afterwards, I'd go to the gym—basketball drills, weights, breakfast. By 9 a.m., the rituals were complete.

And then what?

A nap.

Some phone calls.

Old patient charts revisited out of habit more than need—revisited like ghost stories.

Maybe a trip abroad. Maybe not.

“I think I need something to do,” I told him.

He nodded. “What’s on your mind?”

“Woodworking,” I said, half-serious. I’m good with my hands. I like solving problems. It sounded like a way to quiet my mind.

He smiled, then asked again, more softly this time:

“What are you passionate about?”

“Global health,” I said.

The words came instinctively, but they felt thinner than they once did. A phrase I’d used in interviews, applications, and conversations—now it sounded like a song I used to know by heart, just slightly out of tune.

When I applied for the health equity fellowship at Boston Medical Center, as I was exploring my next steps following infectious disease training, it was with the hope that I’d gain tools to one day give back to Sudan—my home, my compass on an ever-wandering journey from birth. A place long burdened by hardship, but following the revolution, full of possibility. Freedom, peace, and justice weren’t just slogans—they were convictions.

But just weeks before my start date, the war began.

Sudan changed. And so did I.

The home my parents built was ransacked. My family displaced. The university where I once studied scattered and relocated across East Africa. The streets I walked turned into war zones. The hope I had carried with me began to erode under the weight of what I couldn’t stop, couldn’t change, couldn’t fix.

Sudan is now in the grip of one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises. Millions have fled their homes. Famine is growing. Hospitals—once sanctuaries—have become targets. Camps have been razed. Aid convoys attacked.

And I’m here, in Boston. Reading Dostoevsky¹. Drinking coffee. Grieving.

It’s a strange thing—to hold both privilege and powerlessness in the same hands.

What does global health mean now? When institutions meant to act are paralyzed. When the language of health equity feels thin in the face of bombed-out clinics and stolen futures.

That's the question I keep circling back to.

Because I still believe in what drew me to medicine in the first place: the desire to understand, to heal, to build. I remember caring for a man from western Sudan years ago during a rural trip in medical school. He came to us with back pain and leg weakness. After reviewing his past medical history of pulmonary tuberculosis, we suspected spinal tuberculosis. He told us he'd completed his treatment course months ago.

Later, we learned he'd shared his medication with his family—trying to protect them all.

That moment stayed with me. Not just because it was tragic, but because it made sense. In a place where health is shared, where scarcity demands sacrifice, his decision wasn't irrational—it was an act of care, of responsibility, and of love.

That, to me, is what global health should be rooted in: humility, understanding, and the recognition that medicine does not exist in isolation from context or culture.

And yet, here I am—searching again for what to do with my hands, my time, my grief.

Maybe the answer isn't grand. Maybe it's not a big project or a career-defining move. Maybe it starts small, with a story told honestly and a refusal to turn away.

Because even in silence, there can be purpose.

And even in stillness, something meaningful can begin again.

Works Cited

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.