



the human mind, we observe  
the greater desire to deve  
This new

THE  
*Richard Spear, M.D.*  
MEMORIAL  
ESSAY  
CONTEST

HONORABLE  
MENTION

FROM  
STUDENT  
CATEGORY

# White Coat

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White coat. Put it on. Take it off. An utter transformation, there and back, in 30 seconds. I had never stopped to think about the significance of a white coat until I was admitted to medical school and found myself at my own white coat ceremony. Its meaning was so well-ingrained in my mind from such an early age that an understanding of its worth felt natural, almost innate, something that did not need to be questioned, pondered or even brought into my conscious awareness. I see a doctor, man or woman, young or old, of whatever shade and whatever size, and the white coat looks natural on them, as if they were born to wear one and have been wearing it their whole lives.

I pull my white coat around my shoulders and the effect is so incongruent with my previous image that it causes me to pause. I am not a doctor. I am an ordinary person, one with fears and imperfections, one who makes mistakes and tries to learn, but sometimes falls again. I ask myself why I deserve to wear a white coat. I am a first-year medical student, after all, and I was given this coat before I had attended even one lecture, let alone studied for my first exam. I have seen no patients and I have assumed no responsibility for anyone other than myself.

I tell myself that I have plenty of time. That by the beginning of my rotations third year I will feel comfortable in my white coat, and if not by that time, then certainly by my graduation.

As the fall months of my first semester come and go, it becomes clear that my white coat looks less fake to others than it does to me. The first time I wear my white coat outside of campus is for my emergency room preceptorship. It is mid-September and a friend and I stop by the Idea Festival in downtown Louisville beforehand to hear a talk about one man's perspective on the mechanics of the human mind. The time-frame is tight, so I wear my scrubs and white coat to the talk to make sure I will be at my preceptorship on time. I will never forget the expression I see next. An elderly man looks at me and my white coat in a way I have never been looked at before by a stranger. I half expect him to look for a few seconds longer and then realize his mistake. I am not a real doctor, not yet. In fact, I am barely on my way. I have done nearly nothing yet to earn the respect of future patients, let alone strangers. But the man's expression remains unchanged, and his particular blend of admiration and trust begins to feel less unsettling. At least in his mind, I do belong.

Although I keep this experience to myself, somewhat embarrassed that I don't feel completely worthy of the white coat my fellow classmates seem to wear without concern, other people begin sharing stories of coat-induced experiences. Most of the stories involve being mistaken for a doctor during preceptorships in the psychiatry clinic or ER, but the story that strikes me most profoundly did not take place in a medical setting of any kind. Rather, a classmate was seen in a Panera Bread restaurant by a small boy, whose reaction has affected me.

As this little boy stood in line with his mother, he turned to see a classmate of mine in her white coat, and he became scared. At first the boy hid behind his mother and when she did not reach down to protect him, he began to cry. As insignificant and as commonplace as this might seem to seasoned physicians, it is this encounter that is responsible for my fuller understanding of the meaning of the white coat. It is not simply a statement of position, a decoration which you must earn through hard work and dedication. It is also a dynamic symbol that we are constantly defining, one with a purity and authority we must strive to protect. My actions while wearing such a coat will shape the perception my patients have of all others who bear similar coats. Even

now, before I have become a practicing physician, it is my responsibility to protect the reputation of medicine and of other doctors.

Soon spring break rolls around and I realize that I am nearly finished with my first year of medical school. Before I leave for break, I perform a full physical exam for one class and prepare a differential diagnosis for another of a man with toe pain that we eventually diagnose as acute gout. On the car ride up to Des Moines, Iowa, I explain to my family how taking infrequent stops while traveling promotes deep vein thrombosis and why it is that preventing urination for long periods can foster the beginnings of urinary tract infections among prone individuals. When we get to my grandparents' house, my grandmother shows me the splint from her carpal tunnel surgery and I explain to her ways to prevent needing the surgery in her other wrist, which has also been causing her pain. Over lunch my grandfather and I discuss the implications of the recent methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* outbreaks in hospitals across the country. Next we visit my great aunt, who has unfortunately been afflicted with multiple sclerosis since she was hardly older than I am, and I recall what I have learned of neuroanatomy and the symptomatic disease pathway of neuronal demyelination. I race through it all silently as I ask myself over and over how it is that we have no way of helping her. I lose sleep wondering if there isn't some way to prevent or slow autoimmune diseases with gene therapy, transplantation, or drugs, something obvious we just

haven't figured out yet. Then four of my cousins appear, all younger than I am, all healthy and excited about every tiny aspect of life. To me it seems so precious, so incredible that they are all healthy, happy, and safe.

When I get home, my white coat hangs in my closet, waiting for its next outing. I put it on and I take it off and this time it doesn't seem like a transformation at all. I no longer feel like an imposter as I wear my white coat, but I also don't feel less like a medical professional with it off. I am the same person either way. I am going to worry about the health and happiness of others regardless of how I appear on the outside. Disease and decline are just as upsetting and good health is just as amazing with or without my white coat. Although I have much farther to go before I've earned the right to practice medicine, I have grown into my coat, just a little, and I am going to work hard to protect the image of that coat as I continue to grow. After all, what good can we do as physicians if people do not know that we can be trusted, that they can share intimate details of their health with us, and that we will truly work as hard as possible to make certain that they are safe and cared for? The white coat ensures patients of these things, and I am honored to wear mine. LM