

## HEARTBEATS

# What We Give

## Reflections From the Heart of Pediatric Cardiology



Eli S. Fredman, MD

**W**hat does it take to become the kind of doctor a family can trust with their child's heart?

More than I thought. More than I want to give on some days. Sleep, certainly. Time, always. The illusion of control.

I came into this field hoping to learn how to save lives. But no one tells you how much of your own life you will give away in the process. No one warns you about the silent erosion of your idealism and of the part of you that believes effort alone could shape outcomes. You lose versions of yourself along the way. Sometimes, you do not realize what you have lost until it is gone.

I have missed countless "good mornings" with my partner and kids and lacked the energy for "good nights." I have stood staring at monitors in the cardiac catheterization laboratory trying to convince myself I was not missing something, because there is no room to miss anything. I have sat with parents on the worst days of their lives and said words that felt too small for the moment.

And, beneath it all is a persistent, nagging doubt: that the sacrifices I have asked my family to make might be unforgivable; that the missed birthdays and late dinners, the distracted weekends and hollow apologies, were not sacrificed nobly but skipped selfishly; and that I have justified too much in the name of a meaningful life, in a calling that has, at times, come at the expense of the people who love me most.

The deeper realization is not that the work follows you home, but that sometimes it does not. That you have compartmentalized too well. That the sounds of

the intensive care unit no longer echo. That the faces begin to blur. That the second skin you have grown and called armor is not protection, but distance. That in the effort to survive it all, you have lost a piece of your own humanity.

And yet, you still show up.

You show up because somewhere along the way, you witnessed something rare. A child pulling through. A family exhaling after months of held breaths. A moment where you made the right call, and it mattered. That flicker of meaning, impossibly fragile, impossibly precious, becomes enough. You protect it. You chase it. You do it knowing the decisions you make today could echo for decades in a child's life.

To keep afloat, I learned to reach past the moments of despair by keeping a kind of mental folder—a guarded space where I stored the small, undeniable wins. A patient who turned a corner because of management changes made after I spent additional time at bedside. The quiet nod of respect from a senior colleague after a difficult case. An evening at home when my daughters rested their heads on my shoulders, and I could feel how deeply, and unconditionally, I mattered to them. These were not grand victories, but steady anchors in the storm. They became the counter-narrative to the doubt, the evidence I presented to myself when the sacrifices felt too great. Deliberately holding onto these glimmers of light was more than survival; it was how I connected with the core of my calling. It was proof, day by day, that I could love this work and still maintain a clear-eyed understanding of its cost.

---

From the Division of Pediatric Cardiology, Washington University School of Medicine, St Louis Children's Hospital, St Louis, Missouri, USA.

The author attests they are in compliance with human studies committees and animal welfare regulations of the author's institution and Food and Drug Administration guidelines, including patient consent where appropriate. For more information, visit the [Author Center](#).

Manuscript received August 6, 2025; revised manuscript received August 18, 2025, accepted August 20, 2025.

And slowly, if you let it, this work begins to rebuild you. Not with the illusions of certainty and control that you started with, but with something sturdier. A quiet confidence. A presence that does not depend on being brilliant, but on simply being there. You learn that motion is not always progress; sometimes the most vital thing that you can do is sit still with discomfort and think about the physiology, about the system, about the family in front of you.

The journey through residency, fellowship, and beyond is not just a training ground; it is a crucible. It burns away your illusions and forges what is left into a calling. It is terrifying, and it is beautiful. You meet, and create, a version of yourself you did not know could or would exist. A version who shows up after the twentieth hour, who keeps trying when your body, mind, and insecurities tell you to walk away. That version is not always polished or composed, but it is real. And it is brave.

To those of you just starting this journey: You do not have to know everything. You only have to be relentlessly curious and humble enough to ask for help. Let the weight of the work soften you, not harden you. Keep a small collection of your own wins: a thank-you note, a case that clicked, or a smile from a patient who remembered your name. You will need them.

Hold onto the part of you that stays. The part that shows up when it is hard. The part that believes, stubbornly, stupidly, and fiercely, that this work matters. That kindness and clinical excellence are not

opposites; they are prerequisites for each other. That medicine is not math, it is music: a blend of pattern, instinct, and learning to trust a part of yourself that textbooks never reach. That it is worth it.

You learn, finally, how to bring that person home. You discover that the presence you learned to give a terrified family is the same presence your own family needs. The apologies are no longer hollow, because you are no longer hollow. You realize that the antidote to the guilt of missed time is not more time; it is more of you. Fully there. Fully human.

And if you endure the sacrifice, if you wrestle with the doubt, and if you allow yourself to be rebuilt, then you can become the kind of person you needed when you started. Not perfect. Not whole. But honest, and ready to carry someone else the next mile.

Ready to be trusted with a child's heart.

#### FUNDING SUPPORT AND AUTHOR DISCLOSURES

Dr Fredman has reported that he has no relationships relevant to the contents of this paper to disclose.

**ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE:** Dr Eli S. Fredman, St Louis Children's Hospital, 1 Children's Place, St Louis, Missouri 63110, USA. E-mail: [efredman@wustl.edu](mailto:efredman@wustl.edu).

**KEY WORDS** calling, humanism in medicine, medical education, pediatric cardiology, sacrifice