Beyond the White Coat: When Doctors Begin Reclaiming Their Forgotten Selves

(An opinion piece from the perspective of a Doctor navigating medicine, creativity, and identity beyond clinical practice).

Once, during a personal development program, a life strategist asked me a deceptively simple question:

“Who are you?”

With the confidence of years of hard-earned struggle, I answered almost instantly:

“I am a doctor.”

He smiled gently and replied,

“That is your profession. That is your title. But who are *you*?”

For a brief moment, my thoughts froze.

Not because I lacked intelligence.
Not because I lacked words.

But because, for the first time, I realized I had spent years introducing myself through a label I had worn so long… that I had mistaken it for my entire identity.

That single question quietly dismantled something within me.

The white coat I carried with immense pride had gradually become more than clothing, more than a profession, more than service. It had become the only language through which I knew myself.

And suddenly, an uncomfortable realization surfaced:

Being a doctor was part of me.
But it was not the whole me.

THE SILENCE

There is a peculiar silence that exists in the life of many doctors.

Not the silence of ICUs at midnight.
Not the silence between heartbeats during surgery.

A different silence.

The silence of slowly disappearing into a profession so completely… that one day, you struggle to remember who you were before the white coat.

In India, medicine is rarely just pursued.
It is endured.

A profession stitched together with sleepless nights, postponed lives, swallowed emotions, and silent sacrifices that nobody applauds loudly enough.

Somewhere along the journey, endurance stops becoming a temporary phase and quietly transforms into culture.

A culture where exhaustion is mistaken for dedication.
Where emotional suppression is called strength.
Where doctors learn to keep functioning even when parts of them are running empty.

And so, beneath the dignity of the white coat, generations of doctors have mastered a painful art:

‘The art of surviving themselves in silence’.

ABANDONED PERSONAL IDENTITY

Years of entrance preparation, prolonged academic rigor, residency, specialization, super-specialization, night duties, emotional fatigue, and delayed personal milestones collectively ‘shape the making of a doctor’.

By the time many physicians emerge into stable practice, they often discover that while they successfully built a career, large portions of ‘personal identity’ remain underdeveloped, postponed, or quietly abandoned.

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in a healthcare ecosystem like ours, where medicine is deeply romanticized socially, yet emotionally and structurally demanding in reality.

We live a ‘life between diagnosis and deadlines’ with emotional accumulation of patient’s stories and illness filled with our personal chaos.

THE CULTURE OF PRODUCTIVE SELF- ERASURE

One of the least discussed aspects of medical culture in India is how effectively it conditions doctors into narrowing their existence.

Medicine rewards endurance.

The doctor who sacrifices sleep is admired.
The doctor who neglects personal life is normalized.
The doctor whose entire identity revolves around work is celebrated as “dedicated.”

Somewhere within this conditioning, a dangerous equation quietly forms:

The more you abandon yourself, the better doctor you become.

Beneath the applause society gives doctors, another reality quietly unfolds behind hospital doors. Physicians are experiencing not just burnout, but a deeper form of exhaustion, where the mind continues functioning, but the INNER SELF slowly disconnects. Where the doctor remains professionally alive, yet personally absent.

Beyond years of endurance, expectations, and emotional suppression, many are beginning to ask a question medicine rarely prepares us for:

“What remains of me… beyond the role I perform every day?”

RISE OF MULTI-DIMENSIONAL DOCTOR

But now, slowly, Something is changing.

A growing number of doctors are beginning to explore ‘lives beyond clinical practice’, not as an escape from medicine, but as an expansion of ‘selfhood’.

Doctors are writing.
Building businesses.
Creating educational platforms.
Leading conversations online.
Exploring media, design, public speaking, policy, entrepreneurship, and advocacy.

Interestingly, these pursuits are often viewed initially with suspicion within traditional medical culture, as though multidimensionality somehow dilutes professionalism.

The immediate response from the friends and family would be,” why would you do that when you are in a highly rewarding profession?”

But perhaps the opposite is true.

Doctors who cultivate identities beyond hospitals become more emotionally resilient, more communicative, more innovative, and ultimately more human in their practice.

From personal experience, engaging in creative and entrepreneurial spaces alongside medicine did not reduce professional commitment. It restored perspective.

It reminded me that I was not merely a designation moving between departments and duty schedules. I was also a thinker, creator, communicator, and individual capable of impact beyond prescriptions and procedures.

YOUR LIFE DESERVES EQUAL MASTERY

Medicine will always remain one of humanity's most meaningful professions.
But meaning should not require self-erasure.

The white coat symbolizes service, knowledge, sacrifice, and trust. Yet it should never become a container too small for the entirety of a human life.

Doctors were never meant to exist as one-dimensional beings defined solely by workload and qualification.

Somewhere beyond the hospital corridors, beyond the examinations, beyond the endless pursuit of the next milestone, there exists another possibility:

"A doctor who heals others without abandoning themselves".

The white coat is an armour and a badge of honor.

But it should never become a prison.

And as a doctor who writes prescription for others, a powerful prescription you write for yourself may be,

" LIVE BEYOND YOUR WHITE COAT"...

Author's Note:
This piece emerges from lived experience as a medical professional navigating clinical responsibilities alongside creative and entrepreneurial pursuits. It reflects an ongoing exploration of identity, sustainability, and meaning within modern medical practice in India.