

Every Yes is a No to Something Else: Balancing Choices, *μέτρον ἄριστον*

In this year's Pride article, I choose to publish this out of the Pride month (yes because unfortunately I am also a procrastinator) to emphasise the importance of such discussions not only in the [rainbow washed Pride month](#) but throughout the year. I started writing this year's article at the IUIS 2023 in Cape town where yEFIS was present. One year ago, back in Cape Town, we held a wonderful [IUIS 2023: yEFIS workshop on career development and code-switching](#) in an effort to discuss some of the challenges that minority researchers often face and most importantly what we can do as a scientific community to empower marginalized and underrepresented individuals so that we can flourish not only professionally but also personally.

The workshop was a success and the panellists shared their fruitful experiences with us and the audience. For me personally, it was a wonderful experience to invite such a diverse group of scientists and discuss with them their personal journeys. IUIS 2023 in Cape Town was also terrific scientifically, but to be honest with you all, it was triggering and hard for me to be there during this particular time and year. I stayed there for 3 weeks

combining work and holidays. Cape Town's history, shaped by colonialism and apartheid, evoked to me discomfort due to its enduring socio-economic disparities and lingering racial tensions. As a focal point of colonial rule in South Africa, Cape Town has been a hub of exploitation and segregation, with indigenous populations dispossessed of their land and rights. The scars of apartheid, a brutal system of racial segregation enforced from 1948 to 1994, remain very visible in the city's geography and demographics. During apartheid, non-white communities were forcibly relocated to the outskirts, creating areas like District Six, where residents were evicted and the area was declared a whites-only zone. Today, the remnants of these policies manifest in stark economic divides and spatial segregation. Wealthy, predominantly white neighbourhoods contrast sharply with underdeveloped, predominantly non-white townships.

Visiting Cape Town in 2023, one might and perhaps even should feel uncomfortable witnessing these disparities. The ongoing struggle for equality and social justice is palpable, highlighting the historical injustices that continue to affect many residents' lives. The visible inequalities and



the knowledge of their roots in a painful past can evoke a deep sense of unease and reflection on the long-term impacts of colonialism and apartheid on contemporary South African society. As a white privileged man, going to Cape Town for work and then for some holidays made me feel sick

of myself. The contrasts for me were stark constant and daily. There was no escape of my white male privilege, no way to turn around and numb the feeling, no way to ignore it. Cape Town's history, present, and future were there purely, naked, exposed. Even though I always preferred natural

sciences and always failed in history and ancient Greek back in school, I do find beauty in history now for it allows us to not only look back to understand but most importantly to plan our future and hopefully avoid mistakes or react more efficient. After all, to me, the purpose of memory is not to remember the past but to extract out from past lessons to structure the future, similar to adaptive immunity. I was always fascinated by how some Amnesiacs struggle to imagine future events. One of our unique *Homo sapiens* abilities is to project our self into the future and use our imagination to plan, avoid, hope, fear and feel. The human hippocampus plays a crucial role in retrieving and reconstructing past experiences, while the prefrontal cortex helps in organizing and planning future scenarios. By recalling past events, the human brain uses stored information to simulate and predict potential future outcomes. This mental time travel allows us to envision ourselves in different situations, plan actions, and make decisions based on previous knowledge and experiences. This ability is fundamental to our capacity for creativity, problem-solving, and forward-thinking. To its extreme form, this exact ability could cause panic attacks and anxiety, overthinking unrealistic disastrous scenarios. **Balancing Choices, moderation or μέτρον ἄριστον (here in ancient Greek typography, it means: Everything in moderation)** and balancing

our thoughts is crucial to maintain our mental and physical health.

As a Greek living in Berlin, Germany I do find history and tragic, catastrophic, disastrous pockets of memories everywhere in the cities where I have lived both in Greece, USA and Germany from Thessaloniki, Athens and Ioannina to Berlin and San Francisco. How can one visit unbothered a vineyard on a Monday, a township in Cape Town on a Tuesday, and go on surfing on a Wednesday? How can this lifestyle have no reflection on the choices and privileges we have just because one happened to be born wealthy, rich, male, and white, forced and force their own cultures on other people and minorities? Partly, I went all the way down there in the land of "good hope" to not only represent yEFIS and present my scientific research which I am very passionate about, but also lead and chair a workshop based on [my last year's yEFIS article about code switching](#). Co-chairing this workshop with my yEFIS colleagues was by far my favourite part, but during and after the IUIS the deeper I was investing into Cape Town's history, the worse I started to feel. What I realised was that it was not just history and past but also present and future , it felt ironic and that reminded me of my Greek history teacher back in high school when I was arguing with him about my naive opinion that history is not facts like science but just opinions written from one perspective and that it is something that

belongs in the past, while I will become a biologist hence I thought I did not need that. Little did I know...

Was it all hopeless? Absolutely not, for me being in Cape Town with other young immunologists who share and realise these effects was very hopeful, colourful and optimistic. Apartheid, racism, discrimination, and genocide happened and still happen in many corners of our planet, though our Western societies choose to ignore or soften the ones that do not fill particular agendas. In contrast to popular beliefs, I often wonder, from the ancient Greek kingdom, empire of Macedonia with Alexander the Great to Nazi Germany/Europe, why do we choose to justify or even admire one who forces their own culture to others while we judge and reprove a different one who also forces their own culture and beliefs onto others? From all religious or not driven wars, from the Byzantine Empire to the European colonialism of America and other parts of the world, why do some people justify some empires while we dismiss, criticize and blame others? In immunology and science, we do try to be critical and open to new ideas that evolve our current opinions and theories, so why do we choose in other parts of our lives to not apply this way of thinking? Is it comfortable and convenient to have double standards and choose what fits better to us from a basket of fast fashion opinions and ethics? Moreover, who has the capacity to go against a current when

this requires tremendous amounts of energy, money and mental stability? One PhD female nuclear physicist student, full of colour, cannot go easily against a main stream of rich white old male physicist, full of grey. Some social structures want to make us believe, beguile and deceive us that we can, but realistically not all people start the game of life equally and no amount of hard work is often enough to cover the mental, social and financial gaps. In Biology and Immunology, the situation, when it comes to equity and diversity, is a bit better than the field of nuclear physics or other STEM areas, yet the bar is too low and we must still push forward for improvement, space and our rights.

The Classical Model

My personal safe zone has always been the ocean so while being on the other side of the world I grabbed my laptop and found a place in front of the ocean and started working on this article. As an advanced FACS and CyTOF user, I thought I was used to zooming in and out of my data to see the bigger picture of a diseased or healthy immune system, but also zooming deeper into the subsets and check for intriguing changes. It was that moment when I looked back farther in the ocean but then back again into my glass of water. Why do I feel uncomfortable in Cape Town, but I can sleep at ease back home in Berlin? There it was, once again, one of the reasons I love the ocean and why I am drawn to gazing at it for it provides a closer

reflection of who we are than any mirror, it challenges us. Perhaps I am a hypocrite or a victim of the “classical models”, or a mixture of both and more. For example, as a Greek Mediterranean man, I have seen the Mediterranean as a space and a notion with vague contours with no unifying political linguistic or cultural character. It is also in part a construct of the European imagination. From Athens to Palmyra, Rome to Tipasa, and Arles to Leptis Magna, this construct evokes a distant antiquity, a time when Greece and then Rome dominated the Mediterranean basin. The resulting vision is an integral part of the modern identity of European nations which collectively lay claim to the heritage of the so-called “classical” values that are often embraced as “universal” and considered to have been founded in the Mediterranean. This ancient heritage was or has been thus used to justify colonialism and fuel nationalism.

Balancing Choices and Picking Our Battles

We often complain about the receptiveness of our days. Day in, day out, the same morning alarm, breakfast, housework, work, looking after everyone else, dinner,

bath, bed, wake up, repeat. Do we ever pause, though, to think how much peace is in consistency? How lucky we are if everyday is the same? No big disasters or nasty surprises? How there is so much value in enjoying home life? To get up healthy and to do the same tasks day and night is a privilege. Laying our head on a pillow at night and thinking of what to cook for dinner the next day is a level of restfulness some people will never experience in their whole lifetime. This world can be cruel and unnecessary, so if we have the peace of a boring home life, we really have won the lottery of life. I do not see this as an excuse to stay passive in life but to consciously appreciate the privileges some of us have and to balance the pauses with the sprints in our lives. Often pauses have a negative connotation but perhaps it is because they are the hardest to experience. It is hard to pause without distractions and heal on our own without using other people to fill the void that we may feel, to fill our schedule with a million things so we cannot sit in our grief and think about it. Pause forces us to sit in our grief and often it is not a pleasant feeling.



In the intricate journey of life, every decision we make carries some weight. When we say yes to one thing, we inherently say no to something else and vice versa. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the delicate equilibrium between

personal and professional realms. Eventually, it comes down to space and time capacities similar to how adaptive memory cells compete with each other for the niches in tissues. Space and time are limited and so are our capacities. Our

mammalian bodies are wonderful, energy-efficient organisms, and this translates also to the fact that when we do not encounter an antigen for too many years our immune system tries to save energy and gives space to more important matters and cell populations, plasma cells compete with each other for the niches in the bone marrow cause simply there is not enough space (or at least that is what a lot of immunologists think to date).

In today's fast-paced world, the boundary between personal and professional life often blurs. Technology allows us to remain connected 24/7, blurring the lines between office hours and personal time. However, maintaining a healthy balance is crucial for our well-being. Balancing personal and professional commitments requires not only conscious as well as continuous effort, but also involves setting boundaries, prioritizing tasks, and learning to say no when necessary. While professional success is essential, neglecting personal relationships and self-care can lead to burnout and unhappiness. In the short run, multitasking is necessary, but running always on high mode and saying yes to all social and professional settings could cause an opposing effect.

On the flip side, prioritizing personal life over professional commitments can also have repercussions. Striking the right balance means recognizing that both aspects of life are interconnected and equally important. Finding harmony

between personal and professional spheres is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour. It requires introspection, communication, and flexibility. By valuing both personal fulfilment and professional achievement, we can lead more fulfilling lives, where every yes is a conscious choice, and every no is a step towards a healthier balance. Many times as researchers we need to understand our own limitations regarding our capacities. This means that even though a lot of times we may want to run experiment x,y,z it takes time from other experiments or even time to think and process new, fresh but also older ideas. The same topic unravels often in our personal lives or battles we face, we may want to engage in social settings x,y,z though it takes time from other social interactions or even time we would possibly need for ourselves to unwind and recalibrate. Hence, while constantly saying yes to new ideas and settings, automatically, at that same time, we say no to others due to our limitations of constantly being productive and truly present in all the engagements we wish for.

Prioritising is key here. Overall, prioritizing is a valuable tool for achieving balance between all sort of choices, enabling individuals to align our actions with our priorities and create a life that reflects our personal values and goals. In other ways, it allows us to focus our time, energy, and resources on what truly matters to us. Having a focus through prioritizing helps

individuals clarify our goals and values in both personal and professional domains. By understanding what is most important to us, we can make more informed decisions about how to allocate our time and attention. By focusing on what inspires us and what truly matters to us, we can experience a greater sense of purpose and happiness in both personal and professional lives. On the other hand, this does not mean that we should not meet halfway or find common ground during our social interactions, give second or third chances, but as often, balance is the key; everything in moderation, or as we say in ancient Greek **μέτρον ἄριστον** (*here in ancient Greek typography, it means: Everything in moderation*).

Respect vs love

I think that while setting boundaries and trying to love ourselves and others, respect is crucial, especially for marginalized groups like the queer community, as it forms the foundation for genuine love. Unlike love, which can sometimes drive harmful actions under the guise of passion or righteousness, respect ensures that we acknowledge and honour each other's inherent dignity and rights. Throughout history, wars and atrocities have been committed in the name of love, often justifying violence and oppression. To me, True love cannot exist without respect and empathy; it is through respect that we recognize and value others' identities and experiences, fostering deeper, more

meaningful connections based on mutual understanding and acceptance.

The truth is love exists in so much more than a romantic partner. Love is everything around us. I hope we learn how to open our eyes to that, I hope we find love in every aspect of our life, I hope we find it tucked into a boardgame with friends and the smell of our favorite places. I hope we find it strong between the laughter we share with friends, I hope it bounces off of us when we hug the people we care for or discover something that moves us. Mostly, I hope we fall in love with growth and change and the messiness and the beauty of making mistakes while becoming exactly who we want to be and I hope we find love in places that were once devoid of it in places within ourself that we could have been softer or kinder in the past.

As queer people, it is also not enough to just settle for lukewarm conditions just to fit in. I know personally how tempting it is to want to [fit in and code switch](#) and how sometimes it is the only choice we have to survive. I know how tempting it is to give up and play a role, put on my mask and be silent. During interviewing our community and other immunologists I see how many gay men are homophobic, xenophobic, racists, discriminating, misogynists. For example, if every time men had sex, they risked death, physical disability, a life altering interruption in their education or career, and the sudden lifelong responsibility for another human being, I

think they would expect a choice in the matter, yet in many places of the world women do not get to choose and many men do not care. When bullied, it's crucial not to become the bully, especially within minority communities. Often, members of marginalized groups may mimic the oppressive behaviours of the dominant culture, targeting smaller minorities to gain a false sense of power or acceptance. This perpetuates harm and fragmentation within the community. Embracing empathy and understanding instead fosters unity and resilience. For minorities, rejecting toxic, heteronormative traits and supporting all members strengthens collective identity and promotes true equality. Building a culture of respect and solidarity is essential for overcoming shared struggles and achieving lasting social justice. This is one of the many reasons Pride and rainbow symbols are still relevant. After all patriarchy hurts straight men as well, when they have to always put on the mask of a strong independent hunter who must show no weakness nor feelings. Through interviewing straight biological male friends and immunologists, I have also experienced how cathartic and healing it is for them, like all, to open up, express and reach their deepest fears or concerns. Some may think that's a weakness but I strongly believe that being honest and facing our fears is very powerful and hopeful and perhaps the only way through. What I realize often is that it's not we vs

them or me vs you but us against a common problem.

I know we want our happy ending but maybe our happy ending is us continuing to be the soft, loving persons that we are, despite the way the world has tried to defeat us. Maybe it is a calm nervous system a peacefulness that cannot be threatened. Maybe the happy ending is us moving on, is us giving ourselves the love we never got but always wanted. Maybe the happy ending is us embracing change, is us going into a direction of the things that grow us and move us and magnate our spirit. Sometimes we have to remind ourselves that maybe we are not meant for the happy ending that was dictated to us by others.

Grief is a Stone to Carry

My friend Vagelis once told me something beautiful I will never forget about grief and our [velvet rage](#): he said to me that grief is like a stone that you carry it in your pocket, you will feel it, you know it's there but as time goes on you get stronger. As soon as you get stronger it's not that it goes away it's just it gets lighter so it's lighter to carry but it doesn't mean it's going away, you didn't move on, you didn't have to get over it, it doesn't disappear, it doesn't get smaller, it stays the same. You just get stronger, so the stone is now lighter and easy to carry. Vagelis may not live today but regardless, when we feel that whatever our trauma or grief is, gets lighter we must

not stop there but help others carry their own. We should not blame ourselves or each other when we cannot be constantly present or fight for someone's rights or even our own because healing our own traumas and wounds has often higher priority, similarly to how an adult must first put on the oxygen mask on themselves and then assist children on a plane. With that said, often grouping with other people who share similar experiences can be very healing as well, so know that you are not alone out there and even though we must pick our battles do not fight alone, because the stones are easier to carry with some help.

If you have been a victim of homophobia, racism, abuse, or any form of discrimination and wonder what you have done wrong, know that you have not. Some do not like us because our rainbow and light brings out their darkness, because we make them look at themselves, we make them look in the mirror and that's not an easy thing to do. Some don't like you because you show them where they can be better consistently and they do not like that because it shows them where they are weak. Weakness may just be pain. They don't like you because you release their demons and they've worked so hard to mask those demons and keep them locked in the closet and you air it out. They don't like you because their mask doesn't work with you. Let them show you who they are: do not try to control people, just let them

show you who they are and listen. Let them be themselves, if you let them, people will then truly reveal who they truly are. When they reveal who they truly are to you, then you know what you can choose next for you, so let them and choose balance instead. We often may spend so much time and energy to control people and get emotionally worked up about things that are beyond our control, so let them. Some of us may have spent too much time in the closet that we got too comfortable hiding. Though we must master the ability to bounce back, because life will throw us disappointment, people will leave us and maybe we will have to cancel some of our dreams. We may trip a little, but please do not fall. We are all adults now and it is up to us to manage our emotions. It's not just about who hurt us or who made us this way; it is about what we can do to fix our problems and carry the stones with us. Blaming others will only keep us stuck bitter and we may end up hurting other people.

The journey of healing is long but it has showed me that being honest will not destroy something genuine. Expressing our feelings and needs will not make us lose anything valuable. Striving for balance and setting boundaries will not drive away the right people and being authentic will not damage real relationships. Let us keep this in mind in our work environments or personal relationships next time we feel bad because someone backed off when we respected ourselves, shared our feelings,

set a boundary, or held them accountable. We are not healing to handle the traumas. We know now how to do that. We are healing to handle the joy! One of my favourite things in immunology and life in this world is how we pick up little habits, phrases or lessons from the experiences or people we encounter and mostly love. It is no wonder our hearts become broken when people leave or die. I still think of Vagelis who is not alive anymore, or one of the phrases my immunology teacher used to say all those years ago back in uni. We collect so many pieces of people as we go about this life. We are a **rainbow mosaic** of everyone we have ever loved even for a heartbeat. That is also what our immune system does, collecting information and lessons from all the love/hate microbial or cancerous interactions it has encountered even for a heartbeat pathogenic or not.

The Power of Connection

Pride has never been just Gay Pride and a Rainbow. Visibility is of tremendous significance and even though we still have a long way to go if you feel alone know that you never were and never will be.

- The [yEFIS](#) is an initiative run by volunteers that provides a platform for young immunologists from all European countries from all races, ethnicity, class, sex, gender, social status, or cultural background to connect and network in order to shape the next generation of immunologists in Europe.

- The [500 Queer Scientists](#) is a visibility campaign for LGBTQ+ people and their allies working in STEM and STEM-supporting jobs, a group that collectively represents a powerful force of scientific progress and discovery.

- The [Black In Immuno](#) is a platform created by a collective of Black immunologists and allies aimed at amplifying, celebrating supporting immunology.

- The [Women in STEM](#) is a mechanism bridging the gap between social justice and academic fields aiming to empower and inspire girls through offering a variety of opportunities at the high school level.

- The [LGBTQ+ STEM Berlin](#) promotes queer visibility in science technology engineering and maths located in Berlin.

- The [Soapbox Science Berlin](#) is an international series of science communication events that bring research to the streets and highlight the work of Women in Science.

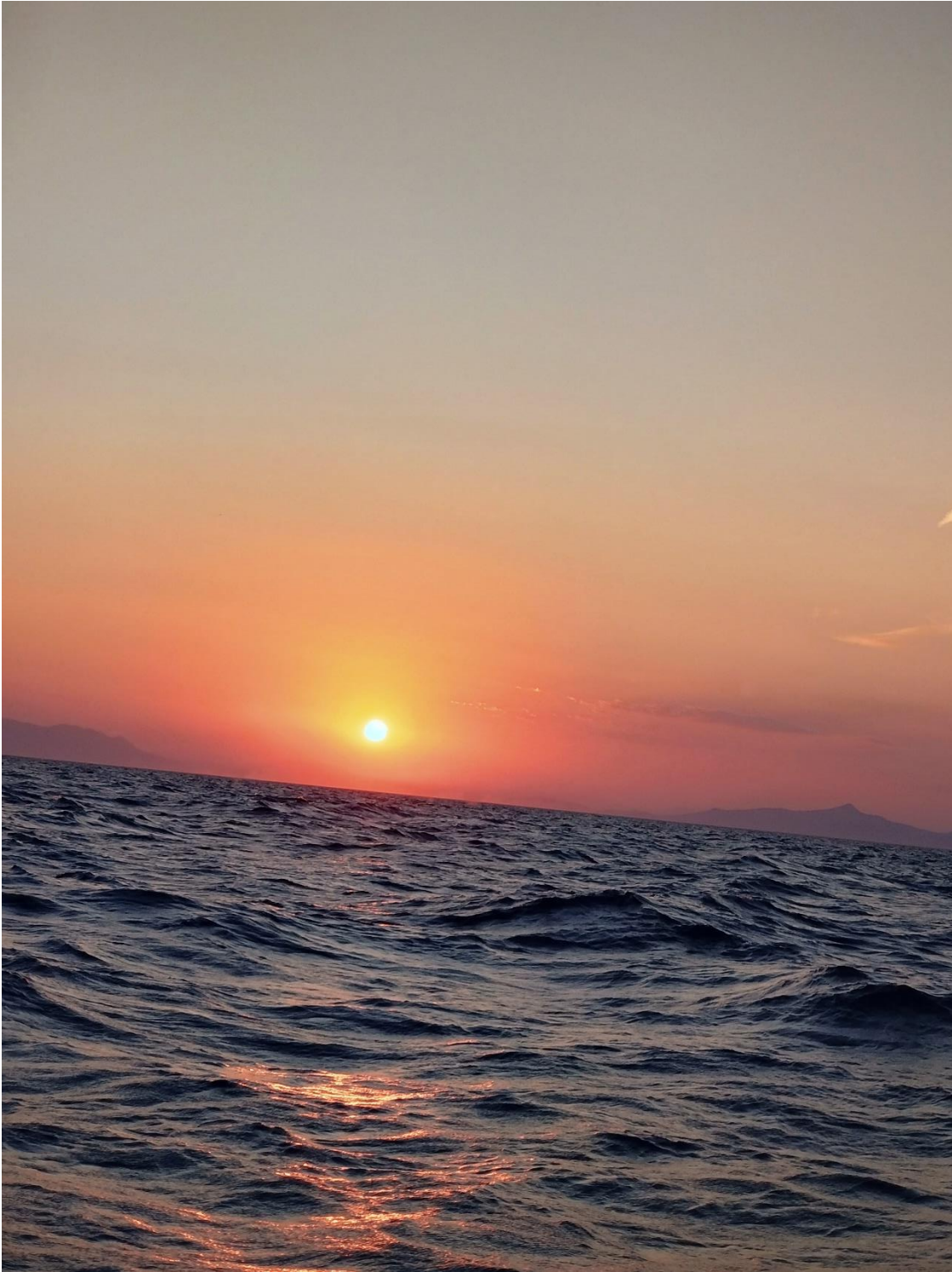
- The [documentary "Picture A Scientist"](#) chronicles the groundswell of researchers who are writing a new chapter for women scientists following the stories of biologist Nancy Hopkins, chemist Raychelle Burks, and geologist Jane Willenbring.

These are only some examples. To me, working closely and together with other volunteers and immunologists has taught me so many things for diverse communities but also for myself. Pride is not a marketing

ploy nor a brand holiday. Pride is not a rainbow-themed party. Pride is a call to remembrance. Pride is for intersectional inclusivity. Pride is here because of trans BIPOCs (Black, Indigenous, People of Color). Pride is a riot, and it affects all people and sexualities. Pride is a symbol to respect those parents back in 1973 but also today marching in support of their LGBTQI+ kids. To me Pride is being humble for the privileges it has given us today and hopefully tomorrow.

Regardless of if we are queer or not, the rainbow will be there to lift us up in our darkest moments. When someone is struggling, I think our instinct is to try to fix

them to pull them from the mud. If you are the one who sits in the mud it is a horrible feeling, just do not try to fix them and pull them. What true respect and friendship is to me is the willingness to sit in the mud with them until they are ready to say can we get out of the mud now? On the other hand, it is so hard to see a beloved one suffer and feel helpless or hopeless, but again I believe balance and moderation is the best option here. During such a process, we also have to take care of ourselves and prioritize us, we need to put our oxygen mask first and keep it cause otherwise we can't help others nor ourselves.



Gazing towards any ocean will not solve our problems but oceans will be there to evoke love and fear to balance and moderate our desperation but also our hope. Looking at a more familiar sea today,

the Aegean, in more crystal-clear Greek waters, I think that the ability to create the reality that we want is partially determined by our willingness to experience its opposite. Saving money will have us

feeling broke while it's actually making us rich. Setting boundaries will have us feeling alone while we're creating new healthy relationships in life. Digging up our traumas will have us feeling broken while it's actually healing us. Learning something new makes us feel dumb while it's making us more intelligent. Hence, our ability to attain the thing that we want is directly

correlated with how willing we are to experience its opposite. How willing we are to experience the blacks and whites in order to end up in the colors. We have to be OK with being uncomfortable to balance and truly achieve success. You got this and any ocean will be there to remind you of that. That is my pride and my rainbow for this year.

To all young and old immunologists out there

Christos Nikolaou

yEFIS Vice-Spokesperson and YI-DGFI Member

On behalf of the yEFIS Equity and Diversity Working Group