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Bambi Keith
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Physicians and patients share a sacred relationship. Each has the power to leave the other transformed. While most physicians can name countless patients who shaped, challenged, and affected them in meaningful and formative ways, it is far less common that a patient comes along and transforms a physician’s family. We generally work hard to maintain professional boundaries and to protect our personal lives and families, thus these worlds rarely collide. Thankfully, my dear patient, Bambi Keith, did cross paths with my family and left us all forever changed.

Keith was one of the earliest patients at my first postresidency practice. His medical complexity was frankly intimidating to me and, on many occasions, I worried that I was in over my head trying to care for his long list of comorbidities. He was an HIV-positive gay man with hepatitis C and cancer of the tongue and throat. He established care with me shortly after having radiation and an extensive surgery to resect the cancer. The surgeons had to remove most of his mandible and a large section of his neck. Not surprisingly, Keith was left with a severely disfigured appearance and his speech was difficult to understand. He was unable swallow and had a great deal of trouble managing excess saliva and secretions. Additionally, the radiation led to nonhealing wounds of the skin flap on his neck, which were forever oozing. He received all of his nutrition via gastrostomy tube, which was a constant source of irritation, and needed replacing often.

During my first year, as I became more adept at managing and anticipating his needs, I grew to be quite fond of Keith. He joked about his ghoulish appearance and maintained an unbreakable optimism. He showed me pictures of his classically handsome, smiling face prior to his cancer treatment and photos of his many travels across the globe. He told me about his close relationship with his adoptive mother, his beloved nephews, and his strained relationship with his long-time partner. He shared with me that his three passions in life were Notre Dame football, quality German beer, and muscle-bound hairy men.

I delighted in his stories, but like most physician-patient relationships, it was entirely one-sided. I knew the intimately personal details of his life while he knew nothing of me or my life outside of the clinic. That changed when I was pregnant with my daughter.

Many women in medicine will attest that working while pregnant inadvertently brings your personal life into your patient interactions. It calls attention, in a highly visible way, to the fact that one is not just a doctor, but also a woman, a wife, and a mother, and that changes the dynamic. Curious patients suddenly start to inquire about your marriage, the pregnancy, the gender of the baby, the due date, and a myriad of other personal topics. It has been my experience that I share a special bond with the patients who were with me through one of my three pregnancies. It has allowed them to feel like a participant in my life and has deepened our relationships.

This was most certainly the case with Keith. He marveled at my expanding belly and repeatedly declared that I was a gorgeous pregnant goddess. I let down my guard and told him more about my life and family. Our relationship, just like my belly, grew during that time. Between wound dressings, G-tube replacements, and medication management, we talked openly and we laughed a lot. Our visits had become special to both of us. He ended every visit with a long hug and “I love you” declarations. I said that I loved him too and genuinely meant it. He brought me a huge box of chocolates the last day before I went on maternity leave, and cried because it would be a long 3 months before he’d see me again. While I was home with my newborn daughter, he called repeatedly to speak to my staff simply...
to ask how the baby and I were doing. He was the first patient on my schedule upon my return, and he greeted me with hugs and gifts.

Now I’ll admit that I generally feel awkward accepting gifts from patients, but Keith’s gifts were so thoughtful and personal, I dared not turn them down. For the baby, he gave me a beautiful framed lithograph print from the Disney movie, Bambi. He told me he had always felt a special connection to that film, being an orphan just like Bambi. He said that as a young boy, watching that movie gave him courage and hope. He was delighted when I told him that there was a perfect spot in the nursery for this picture. Additionally, he had a gift for my son so he wouldn’t feel left out. For him, he brought a big, fuzzy brown teddy bear whom my son promptly named “Chubs.” These generous gifts were brought into my home and treasured. It warmed my heart to see this teddy bear become my son’s most loved companion and I thought of Keith every time I glanced at the Bambi print hanging over my daughter’s crib. Keith was absolutely tickled that my children then nicknamed Bambi Keith and referred to him as such whenever talking about Mommy’s nice patient who had given them these presents.

Several months later, my family would make another meaningful connection with Bambi Keith. After clinic one afternoon, I had my son—then 6 years old—with me as I ran into our local Target to pick up some groceries. While checking out, I heard Bambi Keith’s familiar greeting from several registers over, “There’s my doctor goddess!”

We walked over to say hi, and I soon noticed my 6-year-old’s grip on my hand becoming tighter as he stared at Keith’s disfigured, oozing face. When Bambi Keith turned toward my son to say hello, my darling, precocious child bluntly blurted out, “What’s wrong with your face?” I was mortified. But before I could apologize, Bambi Keith candidly replied, “What’s wrong with your ears?” My son, who is hearing impaired and wears bilateral hearing aids, didn’t quite know how to respond so Bambi Keith told him, “Let’s sit down and talk. I’ll tell you about my face and you can tell me about your ears.”

My son followed him to a bench in the front of Target and they sat down together to talk. It was clear this was to be a private conversation between the two of them so I stood just out of earshot, pretending to look at sunglasses. I watched as they sat down, leaned in, and had a heart-to-heart talk. After about 10 minutes they stood up, high-fived, and waved goodbye. Bambi Keith winked at me and then turned to leave.

I immediately started questioning my 6-year-old about their talk. Apparently they talked about their respective conditions and what it’s like to be different. My son didn’t say much more but on the drive home, he asked me, “Are you helping Bambi Keith get better? Do you help other sick people like him too?” When I answered yes, my son knowingly nodded. I felt like something clicked in my child and he suddenly understood why it was that I worked long hours and sometimes wasn’t home.

While my son has always been a sensitive soul, his openness and capacity for understanding grew that day as well. He began asking thoughtful, curious questions about people with cancer or other disabilities, no longer simply staring and griping my hand tighter as he did that day in Target. He asked me more about my patients and their struggles. I even saw him become more confident in discussing his own hearing impairment. My son met an ill, disfigured man at Target that day and left with a friend who challenged him and kindled the flames of true empathy.

In the year that followed, Bambi Keith’s health worsened as he faced new diagnoses and setbacks. He continued to ask about my children at every visit and brought them small gifts, all trinkets from his own collection of possessions—a small bear from Harrods he bought years ago while visiting London, a metal tiara he somehow got from Notre Dame’s homecoming queen while he was in college, a windbreaker from my alma mater, the University of Illinois. He brushed off my repeated insistences that the gifts were too much by claiming he no longer needed the items, he was simply decluttering his home, and that he would otherwise throw them away. In retrospect, I think he knew he was dying and he was actively bequeathing his treasured possessions and spreading joy with them with the time he had.

One morning, only about a week since my last visit with Bambi Keith, my clinic was abruptly interrupted by a text page that I’ll never forget.

“Please call coroner immediately regarding death of patient Keith X.”

I somehow muddled through the clinic in a state of disbelief, tears clinging dangerously close to the edges of my eyelids all day. Yes, I logically knew how sick he had become and that his death should not have been a surprise. I think I was most disturbed by this simple page heralding the death of such a remarkable human being. It felt entirely wrong and sadly ironic that the final expression of Bambi Keith’s life, a life lived with such joy and light, was the cold green flashing light and accompanying hum of my pager alerting in the pocket of my lab coat. Even now, I think of that page and get a hollow ache in my stomach reminding me of the abrupt, unjust ending to my relationship with Bambi Keith.

This man changed me. He challenged me professionally, expanded my medical knowledge of HIV-related comorbidities, and brought joy and friendship to my often stressful and harried practice. He taught me that if I allowed myself to be more open and truly genuine with my patients, I would be rewarded with more meaningful and effective patient-doctor relationships. Most importantly, his optimism and happiness in the face of adversity inspires me to persevere and smile even on the toughest days.
This man changed my family. Through his generous gifts and a momentous meeting, my children have a deeper understanding of my calling and career. I see my son especially transformed, exuding confidence in the face of his own disability, and a deep empathy for others who are different, sick, or suffering.

Sadly, I doubt that our dear Bambi Keith ever realized how much we all appreciate him. But at night, when I'm tucking my children into their beds, I look at the teddy bear in my son's arms, and the Bambi print over my daughter's crib, and I think of him with warm affection and deep gratitude.