

Healing Notes

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My father scheduled performances at the Bay Village Retirement Center, featuring the “Scherer Quartet plus One.” The 1st violin was my sister Ingrid, 2nd violin my brother Philip, viola my brother Erik, I played the cello, and the “plus one” was my youngest brother Jakob, who had the role of playing maracas during Latin numbers and falling asleep on stage during classical numbers. As we organized the stage before our performances, I would glance at the audience and observe the shuffling gaits and stroller and cart assistance devices that helped our audience members move half as swiftly as my 13-year-old body. It was usually these same people, however, who upon hearing “Lara’s Theme” from “Dr Zhivago,” would leave their devices leaning against their chairs and slowly dance with whomever was sitting next to them.

My reverie was cut short. “Mr B is probably going to die tonight.” My stomach folded, and my mind rewound to an initial memory of Mr B, particularly, his Hulk-Hogan-esque facial features. His shining bald head, his poorly manicured goatee with hairs hanging below his chin, and his throaty, deep

Southern accent created an invincibility that bewildered anyone as to why he was on the Oncology service. He was my first patient on the Oncology service and with his appearance and attitude, I knew we would be able to body-slam his distal femur osteoblastic osteosarcoma into remission.

His rough exterior, adorned in skull and bones T-shirts, quickly changed over the month that we worked together as he repeatedly failed multiple chemotherapy regimens. His goatee disappeared, his head was covered in Confederate-flag bandanas, his legs relied on a wooden cane, and his Southern accent lost its grit. Later we stayed in touch with phone calls and meetings when he would travel from Georgia to Florida to undergo outpatient chemotherapy. He no longer could withstand hospital admission requiring chemotherapy dosages because his absolute neutrophil count was too depressed after each treatment cycle.

Three months after our last contact, I received a phone call from a classmate who was now assigned to Mr B’s case. “Mr B is probably going to die tonight.” My classmate then stated that Mr B’s wife had purchased a triangular-shaped, stringed instrument, and they were wondering if I could play some of his favorite Southern country tunes, a request founded on my family trio’s blue-grass music concert at his bedside earlier that year. I inquired more about this instrument, which had 13 strings and realized

it resembled a violin more than a cello. I sprinted to the freshman medical lab to find my brother Philip, a talented violinist and first-year medical student, hoping that between the two of us, comforting music could be performed.

I was shocked upon seeing Mr B gasping for air and the sound of the room filling with gallons of air leaking through his ventilation mask. His wife ran toward me, hugged me, and I could feel her tears as her wet cheek touched mine. I turned to my classmate and asked, “What happened?” He explained that the bone cancer had spread to both of his lungs. I tried to remain calm and appear strong, so I would pinch my index finger against my thumb to help my tear ducts ignore the sorrow.

My brother broke my silence and the sound of leaking air by asking for the musical instrument. This was definitely neither a violin nor a cello. Fortunately, there was a plastic covering on the fingerboard that showed where to position the bow for certain pitches to sound. My brother attempted first and played “Amazing Grace.” I followed his performance with another performance of “Amazing Grace” and then other songs in the beginners’ book, including “Pachelbel’s Canon in D.” No blue-grass music was played that day.

During our 20-minute performance, Mr B would drift in and out of consciousness. But, one last time his mind lingered long enough to recognize me. He grabbed my

(Fam Med 2009;41(8):547-8.)

hand and asked, "Why didn't you call?" This hit me right in the heart. I flashed back to the mornings he jokingly, yet firmly, grabbed my arms during the physical exam and told me to stop being a "pest" because of my attention to detail. My mind reviewed our phone

conversations and meetings from January to March, but I couldn't justify this lapse in time as I kept hearing my conscience say the words, "But you haven't talked to him since March."

"Why didn't you call?" Those were the last words he spoke to me.

The musical notes were fading in the room and drifting away down the hall. Yet, hanging in the air there was: "Why didn't you call?"

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