

Story Slam - Lingley

Transition from doctor to healer

While caring for Mr. A, I felt like a healer, not only a doctor. He was a thin, pale-skinned 43-year-old man, too weak to get out of bed, and nearing the end of his life. When I spoke with him, he would not engage in our conversation. Instead, he preferred to be alone in his dark, quiet hospital room, trying to distance himself from this grave situation and his providers. Mr. A struggled with drug addiction, and he was now dying from one of its complications, endocarditis, an infection of the heart valves. There was no cure for his disease. I could not heal him, and he was unwilling accept this terrible truth.

Yet, after weeks of minimal engagement, our relationship strengthened as his trust in our care grew. He had little support to help comfort him at the end of his life, but would often discuss his estranged mother. As he began to accept the severity of his illness, he requested that I update her. He refused to speak with her directly, but agreed to receive her letter. When the letter arrived, it sat in the dark, unopened on his bedside table among his scattered, few belongings. It was clear he had not read it, but he would not share why. Finally, after days of inquiry, he looked directly at me, "I can't see well enough to read." His infection now involved his eyes. At that moment, he was no longer withdrawn and disengaged, but scared and asking for help.

He accepted my offer to read the letter. It was humbling to be trusted with something so personal. I sat with him in his dark hospital room, reading a letter from his mother whom he had not spoken to in years. He sat quietly looking at the ceiling, occasionally smiling at the humor of his mother's words, his eyes tearful from the comfort she provided. This was not an attempt to cure his disease, but instead an attempt to help him navigate a difficult situation and to provide him some peace at the end of his life. At this moment, I did not feel like a resident doctor, but a healer being there for an estranged mother and her dying son, reading a letter he could not see.