

MIND TO MIND

*Creative writing that explores the abstract side
of our profession and our lives*

Stephen T. Harvey, M.D., Editor

Losing My Favorite Anesthesiologist

Terrance A. Yemen, M.D., F.R.C.P. (C)

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Nothing came easy for Sean. Even his arrival in the world was rather rocky. Sean's father was on call at Boston Children's Hospital when Sean's mother went into labor. Brigham and Women's Hospital was busy that night, and there were no available beds. When it was time to deliver, they were moved into a storage room. The labor was short, and the obstetrician proudly delivered Sean, laying him on his mother's belly. But Sean was blue, not moving and not breathing. "Is this normal?" she asked. "No!" his father shouted, frantically picking him up, moving him to an abandoned incubator, and starting resuscitation. Moments later he handed a beautiful, pink, screaming baby boy back to his mother.

As a student, Sean found schoolwork difficult. He would say, "I'm just not very smart." In one parent-teacher conference after another, his parents would hear that Sean had ADHD or something similar. Sean didn't get a lot of lucky breaks as he grew up, particularly physically. His brothers could fall down the stairs and simply bruise themselves; Sean would fall down the stairs and need stitches. As he got older, Sean began to believe that he had some horrible, incurable disease; his parents and brothers just rolled their eyes. But Sean was more attuned to his body and health than others realized. For example, he was convinced that he had colon issues and, indeed, doctors discovered polyps and encouraged a colectomy. When he caught a cold and it developed into chest pain, no one took the symptoms seriously. Determined that something was really wrong, Sean went to his pediatrician, who diagnosed him with viral myocarditis and admitted him to the hospital. Sean gradually improved. However, he was left with a weaker but still loving heart.

From the University of Virginia Health Sciences System, University of Virginia School of Medicine, Charlottesville, Virginia. tay9h@virginia.edu

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That experience changed Sean's life. Impressed by the doctors and nurses that looked after him, Sean wanted to return the favor to others. He would become a doctor—not exactly an easy path to take for a business student who spent summers working at an auto body shop. Many who knew Sean as a student thought the idea downright absurd. But he strategized, worked hard, and was eventually accepted into medical school.

Shortly thereafter, two events happened. Sean decided to do an anesthesia residency and was accepted in my department. And he proposed to Mary, the love of his life. In his typical understated approach, Sean sent a text about the proposal to his family. Then nothing. Several hours passed. His mother impatiently called to ask, “Did she say yes?” He casually responded, “Oh yeah, of course!”

I cherish the moments that I worked with Sean. He was a friend to everyone, from every walk of life. Whether working in the cafeteria or running the department of surgery, Sean knew how to connect with people. Indeed, he became renowned around the hospital as a talented doctor who would put a smile on your face. With his jokes and teasing and often inappropriate but hysterically funny comments, Sean could get everyone in the room laughing. Yet, he respected his seniors and understood his obligations to his juniors. His humor was balanced by both his work ethic and his respect for others. He made small but meaningful gestures on a daily basis despite his busy schedule: taking his favorite breakfast to a geriatric patient whose family had abandoned him; buying gifts for another patient, alone and lonely. I reveled in the joy of seeing what a fine doctor and even finer person he had become.

My last private conversation with Sean took place at my house. He had decided to follow in his father's footsteps and wanted to talk about his future in pediatric anesthesia. We talked about a number of possibilities. I said I would do everything I could to help him make it work. He looked at me and said, “You know nothing comes easy for me.” The next day was the last time I saw Sean. We were both on call, and he came to visit while doing a late case. He made a few jokes and teased the entire operating room staff. Two days later, I got word that Sean had not shown up at the hospital to take his weekend call. His mother rushed over to his townhouse. Shortly afterward, she called with devastating news: Sean had peacefully passed away in his sleep. It appeared that his loving heart had unexpectedly failed him.

Finding meaning in Sean's passing has been very difficult. I have tried to rationalize it in my own way. At times I believe that the powers-that-be begrudgingly gave us Sean and let us keep him for a while. But after thirty-one years of being loved by friends, family, and his precious fiancée, it was time for Sean to leave. He may have been unlucky in many things, but he left behind a lot of people who were lucky to have known him. Very, very lucky.

I miss that gentle boy. He made me a better person. He made us all better. Now he will reside forever in our hearts. He lived life well. He made my life beautiful.

With much love and respect,

His Father