

MIND TO MIND

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

Stephen T. Harvey, M.D., Editor

Fear in Perspective

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I review the patient's chart. I enter the room and step around the curtain where she waits, ready for her operation. She is comfortably chatting with her grown son and daughter. Her elderly husband leans on his cane, head tilted to catch all the conversation. Views of the sun-dappled East River calm the mind.

Introductions are made, medical history reviewed.

My patient says: "So, if I make it, after this, I'll have a new hip."

Her husband leans back; son and daughter move in.

"Tell me more," I say, "What do you mean, 'If I make it?'"

"Well, you know," she says, her eyes tearing, "If I make it..."

"Why wouldn't you make it?" I ask. "Do you have a sense about something that you're not saying?" acknowledging that people sometimes do have a premonition about something going terribly wrong.

"I've just never been sick before." She fights back tears.

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There is something familiar about her red-rimmed blue eyes.

“I think she’s just scared,” her daughter jumps in.

Again, I look the young woman’s mother in the eyes. Suddenly, it is *my* mother I see, and I am carried away into a long-ago conversation.

Standing in the living room of my Manhattan apartment, I am holding a birthday card from my mother and have called to thank her.

“But, Mom, where’s the soap?”

“What soap?”

“The soap you send me every year for my birthday.”

“Mary, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I feel the psychic tremors from this internal earthquake. In her new world, there is now no French-milled soap that she religiously buys at her favorite California department store and ships off to me in New York, year after year, always in time for my birthday.

My mother was 84 then. Surely she had earned the right to a little forgetfulness, but not in my world. This was not *my* mother. *My* mother was an energetic, organized dynamo who worked full time, kept the family going, and daily completed the *New York Times* crossword over lunch. Reality was that she had forgotten the soap, had had a few “accidents” with the car, and, despite 60 years as an expert, had forgotten how to knit.

My mother was afraid in the end, lonely and suffering acute pain. I heard it in her voice when I phoned her one evening and to my greeting she replied, “I just fell, Mary, and now they’re here for me.”

The caretaker took the phone, “The ambulance will be taking your mother to Memorial...”

Don’t die, Mom—not yet, I said to myself as I hung up the phone.

I return to the conversation at hand. “Listen, let’s go over exactly what to expect today when we go into the operating room.”

I review. I explain. I ask the dark question, “Can this go wrong?” Then, “Is it likely to go wrong?”

Everyday words. Simple explanations.

“Hundreds of people just like you have done this before...no reason to think that having come this far...will do beautifully...a new lease on life.” Having been thrown off momentarily by her emotion and my memories, I’m in the swing now, back in the saddle.

She is not my mother. I am not her daughter. With reassurance, her fear diminishes and optimistic resolve emerges. And although she has touched that invisibly raw place within me, I too have reemerged. Taking her hand, I note the relief in the faces of the family and accept their thanks. I conclude the interview and leave the room to prepare the case.