

# MIND TO MIND

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

*Stephen T. Harvey, M.D., Editor*

## Behind the Mask

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**A**s I performed the routine anesthesia machine and equipment checks, I barely noticed the nursing staff preparing the sterile surgical equipment trays, and checking the operating theatre lighting, suction and electrocautery machine. A nurse helped me wheel my first patient into the theatre, while the surgeons impatiently waited for induction. About half an hour into the surgery, the experienced surgeon reprimanded the nervous trainee nurse assistant for handing him the wrong surgical instrument. After the second slip-up, the surgeon threw the instrument on the floor and demanded that the junior nurse leave the theatre at once, adding, "You were probably not even born when I invented this suturing technique!" The young nurse quietly discarded her gloves and left the theatre. After I transferred the patient's management to the post anesthesia care unit team, the recovery nurse asked me, "Do you think there is any meaning in all of life?" Taken aback by the apparently unrelated question, I hastily smiled and flashed back an answer to the effect that helping others gives meaning to life, before I rushed back to induce the next patient. A week later I learned that the junior nurse had quit her training at our hospital; and a year later the nurse in the recovery room quietly confided that she had gone through with her divorce.

I wonder how the people we work with every day feel as they come to the hospital each morning. Is it just another day, another case, another demanding surgeon, another surgical instrument bundle to organize? Who knows what our colleagues are going through as they put up their bravest front to cope with the demanding routine of the operating theatre schedule?

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Maybe a coworker's toddler is ill, but she can't stay home with him. Maybe a colleague's promotion has been withheld for the third time. Maybe the circulating nurse was up all night with her crying infant. Maybe the scrub nurse's mother is not coping well at the hospital. Maybe the surgeon had an argument with his spouse that left them both hurting and angry that morning. Who knows what each one is up against? Who knows what lies behind the mask?

I believe that when we come to work each day, we must put our own stresses aside and focus on our patient. But we never work alone. I believe we must greet our trainees with a smile, teach them and encourage them as they continue their training. I believe that surgeons, nurses, orderlies and clerks, all have their special roles and we all work as a team. Taking a few moments to greet our colleagues before the start of a case; congratulating the surgeon on a difficult case done well; consoling a nurse who has been reprimanded; thanking an orderly for promptly cleaning the theatre—these are little things that I've learned from my teachers.

The mask hides a world of pain, bitterness, loss, resentment and failure. Strangely, when someone's eyes light up behind the mask with a timely word of encouragement, my own cares seem lighter, and life's purpose shines through.