

MIND TO MIND

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



Stephen T. Harvey, M.D., Editor

Acceptance

A Letter to My Grieving Self

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Dear Younger Me,

I know how hard things are for you right now. I know that you cry as you sit in bed at night. I know you are tossing and turning, not sleeping. I know the sense of disbelief you feel every time you walk into your patient's room and see him intubated, on pressors, with a massive stroke and two dead limbs, the air smelling of gangrene. I know the horror that you feel as you silently acknowledge that you are part of his suffering. "Acknowledge" isn't the correct word; you feel it with every breath you take. It fills every crevice of your mind. There is no escaping it.

I am sorry to tell you this, but things will get worse before they get better. You will come to know his estranged wife and grieving mother. You will see them frequently over the next few months. They will welcome you at his bedside and ask about your wedding plans. When he passes away during your honeymoon, you will find solace in the friend (a fellow anesthesiology resident) who calls you to break the news. It will bring tears to your eyes and lighten the load on your heart at the same time. It will feel like the end of a horror film.

These words are not meant to excuse your part in an innocent man's death, but I want you to understand that this experience will make you a better doctor. I want you to know that by accepting your role in his death and vowing not to forget it, that you will experience a certain kind of grace that comes only through redemption. Acknowledging your own fallibility, these lessons will shape you as a physician and as a human being. It will be a transcendental blessing to the thousands of patients you will care for and to your personal relationships.

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Finally, just as our loved ones never leave us as long as they live in our memories, this patient will live on for you, too. In some ways, he will be a more faithful companion than many of your oldest friends. He will keep you company during quiet moments. He will not waste time with accusations, and you will feel no animosity from him. Rather, his presence will be comforting. He will represent the darkest period of your life, but your continued practice of the art and science of medicine will be proof of your resiliency. We are all imperfect. The victory comes in surviving our failures and learning from them. He represents your strength.