

MIND TO MIND

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

Stephen T. Harvey, M.D., Editor

Anesthesia Reunion in Hospice

Ellen Roark Basile, D.O.

In December, all eight of us were together for the first and last time since graduating from our anesthesia residency program in Philadelphia. Before going our separate ways after graduation, we had made plans for a 10-year reunion. Years later, we never imagined our celebration would be held at hospice.

Eight months before our reunion, Tom, one of our co-residents, told us he had been diagnosed with stage IV cancer. He was told there was no cure. Two months later, Tom was being prepped for emergency surgery. One of our classmates was Tom's anesthesiologist for the surgery! Neither of them had any idea their paths would cross on that day. When the pre-op curtain was pulled back, our classmate was totally surprised to find Tom on the stretcher. Thankfully, the surgery went well. Tom arrived safely in the PACU, wondering when the procedure would start.

Anesthesia is amazing, but, sadly, it does not cure cancer. Tom failed multiple rounds of chemo, and all options for treatment were exhausted.

Out of necessity, we moved the reunion up because 10 years was no longer an option. The week of the reunion, Tom was moved to in-patient hospice.

We gathered at his bedside.

His breathing was slow and shallow; we knew it would not be long.

We held hands.

There were tears.

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We shared a prayer that was not exactly a prayer: “If we never see each other again, it doesn’t matter, because you are in our hearts already, and that’s forever.”

Nothing can prepare you for medical training. Regardless of the specialty, it is a sacrifice. We were fortunate; our residency class was unusually close during our training years. We often ran to help each other in the OR. Outside the OR, we shared monthly themed parties, weekend study groups, dinners out, and spring break trips. Just like siblings, we had disagreements, but if there was a trauma in OR 9, everyone showed up. I am so thankful for those years. I wish, somehow, we could go back to the day before he was diagnosed.

Tom’s wife called 3 hours after we had left hospice to let me know Tom had died. We exchanged the usual sentiments you say when someone dies, which is to say, almost nothing at all. But as we hung up she sweetly added, Tom wouldn’t have missed our reunion for the world!