As I sit down to write this essay, I realize it’s been exactly 1 year since I received a phone call that left me stunned and speechless: my dad has cancer. Suddenly, the excitement of my first rotation as a third-year medical student dissipated, and I was left with the cruel, numbing reality that my life had completely changed. He was an incredible and beloved nephrologist, and one of the many life lessons he taught me is what love and service look like—both as a father and a physician.

In the months following his diagnosis, I spent every free weekend traveling home to spend time with him. Driving 7 hours roundtrip quickly began to take its toll on me, however, and I became physically exhausted and emotionally drained. For the first time, I allowed myself to become entirely vulnerable and lean on family and friends for support. My dad’s bravery and constant encouragement uplifted and inspired me, and despite the chronic fatigue, I eventually adapted to the increasing demands from both my personal and professional life. My dad was the strongest person I have known and was selflessly dedicated to his patients; as he continued to provide much needed health care to his own patients in the face of the most difficult fight of his life, how could I not continue pursuing my own path? I promised him that I would never stop learning so that one day I would become the next Dr Bierle, a dream we both shared since I was a little girl. This would be my legacy.

Meanwhile, each patient encounter during my clinical rotations served a pivotal role in my personal life, teaching me more about the intricate interactions among the physician, caretaker, and loved ones. As I watched my father transition from physician to patient, I began to assume the role of caregiver to provide a sense of calm for my family. Seeing medicine through the eyes of my father’s illness showed me the overwhelming impact of empathy in medicine, but I also learned the value of the grieving process. Grief isn’t linear or predictable, and it’s certainly not glamorous. Rather, it can be ugly, raw, and paralyzing. It is haunting and isolating, intense and all consuming. Grief’s vice grip strikes at the most inopportune times, just when you’ve breathed a sigh of relief thinking you may have finally conquered the monster. It’s in these moments, though, the deepest and darkest times, that I see a glimpse of growth in me that would make my dad proud.

Owning the grief process and working through the pain, the profound loss, and the unimaginable heartache brings me 1 step closer to truly understanding the complex stories of each patient whom I have the privilege to serve, and that is an awesomely powerful gift born from grief.

My dad passed away in May 2017 after braving 9 months of advanced cancer. Through my dad’s life, his suffering, and, ultimately, his passing, I am learning what it means to live well, to be intentional and present in every conversation, and to never take for granted the time afforded to me. I take comfort in knowing that the very best parts of my abilities as a student and future physician are and will be a direct reflection of his influence in my life. Each day without him has been vastly more difficult than I could have anticipated, but I am humbled to honor the promise I made to him and to myself to complete my medical school journey. In May 2018, exactly 1 year and 1 day after his passing, I plan to walk across the graduation stage to embrace the role of the second-best Dr Bierle. (doi:10.7556/jaoa.2018.058)

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