

Whispers by the Winds of Time

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The heart weeps yet the eyes do not shed a tear; the soul wails in pain but the lips remain silent; every cell of your body wants to breakdown and let out the storm of emotion that is drowning your existence, yet the coat of composure manages to contain it. Such is the life of a doctor and the training that teaches us to remain calm even in the face of monstrous circumstances that threaten to devour you. I do staunchly believe that we have been chosen- chosen to stand our ground and not run away, chosen to provide a heeding ear to a son who is tired after hours of attending to his sick mother , chosen to give the warm touch of solace to a mother who is holding her ailing child in her arms, chosen to wipe the tears from a daughter's eyes who is holding her father's hand for the last time. Fate has bestowed us with unfathomable gifts, the most wondrous of which is our exposure to experiences which enrich the purpose of our existence and teach us valuable lessons every day, provided we open our hearts to them.

As we navigate through life we learn from our parents, our teachers, our peers, our books and though the value of each of these is unique we learn the most from our patients. The real-life lessons that our patients teach us can never be learned in classrooms or libraries. Not only do they teach us medicine and disease course but also life lessons which other people may never be subject to. Each encounter begins with a story and that story has the power to permeate every aspect of your life only if we are willing to acknowledge it.

When you take the oath to become a doctor you do not realize that you will be unable to save every life. The first time a life slips from your grip you find yourself grappling in the dark, helpless, trying to use every faculty you have at your disposal to somehow hold on and bring it back. Yet Allah makes it clear that the decision is his. You played the part Allah has destined you for, but the outcome is not in your control in any way- never was and never will be.

I recollect as a young house officer, full of energy and determination, when we admitted a patient with rabies. To this day I can hear his restless cries, his screams and amid all that he kept on crying bitterly for his one-year-



old daughter. The love that he had for his daughter was too intense even to be wiped out by delirium. As the night wore on, he grew increasingly aggressive. The nursing staff too began to shy away fearful of the strong man who had no control over his actions, who was getting physically violent, who was gasping for air, who was maddened by the sight of water so that even the drips had to be covered by a cloth, a man who was turning into a powerful yet insane being whose strength seemed to grow in proportion to his delirium. Somehow, he would continue to receive injections from me though it might have been because I was the only one still willing to offer my care. The last word he uttered before the final whistle was his daughter's name..... a daughter who would grow up without ever having known her father and who would never know how much he loved her even in his insanity.

I can also recall my first call as a first-year resident when I found myself frantically calling up the consultant on call as we were looking after a 20-year-old girl with

aplastic anaemia. She was bleeding from everywhere: epistaxis, hematemesis, melena, gum bleeding. No matter how many platelets and red blood cells we transfused the bleeding just would not abate. I remember the consultant telling me that I was doing my best and there was nothing else I could do, but I just did not read between the lines. That night we lost her too and I remember quietly shedding tears in the duty room before I could once again offer solace to the grieving family.

Or just a few weeks back when I did the round and saw a 22-year-old girl, fragile and weak, lying listless on the bed. She was in so much agony that even turning on the bed so that I could listen to her chest was a task she could not perform on her own. Her eyes lacked lustre and it felt as if she was staring into the unknown trying to understand why it had to be her? A mother to two girls, three and one year old. The husband held the biopsy report he had just received in his hand. invasive ductal carcinoma of the breast, it was already stage 4. His eyes questioned me as if wanting some miracle to happen that would save his life partner, the woman who the mother of his girls. We lost her to a few hours later.

Such is life, as it teaches you that age is no guarantee of a long life. How long you have is anybody's guess. Every breath you take, every moment you live, is a gift which must be used to live fully for: 'Health is the crown on the well man's head that only the ill man can see'.

Surviving a pandemic and absorbing the lessons learned are a whole other chapter. When everyone ran away, was in lock down, it was us who walked towards the fire. We did not know what awaited us, whether it would scorch us or consume us, what would happen if we fell sick, if we could be risking our families and yet we stood tall and went into fight with full armour. They said it was only those of age and with multiple comorbidities who were most affected, yet the youngest patient I lost was just nineteen. I remember looking him in the eyes just a few hours before we had to intubate him, the desperation, the question, the helplessness in his gaze still pierces my heart today.

You also get to see humanity up close. You see edges of the human fabric slowly fraying away. There is the son who would not accompany his father's body for burial after he had died from COVID-19 because of the fear of somehow contracting it too. You interact with children who have lived their lives in greener pastures only to come home to hospitalised and neglected parents. They always blame the doctors for not doing enough, yet they are reacting out of guilt of not being able to do enough themselves. You soak it all in because you understand the hurt, they carry, and if letting it out helps them, so be it.

There are also parents who never gave their daughters

the same value, privileges, or rights as their sons. Yet at their death beds they find that it is the daughter who has left her family to take care of them.

Then there is the man whose body shakes with tremors in such a magnitude that that even moving across the corridor without swaying is impossible for him, but he is not the patient, he's brought his wife for a consultation and as compared to him she doesn't have any pressing condition at all. You are left wondering at the depth of the devotion that he holds for his companion, and you pray that they can teach all those witnessing them the lesson of boundless love.

Time and again you find yourself lending an ear to an elderly parent who is living alone. The children have all fled the nest and they just want someone to talk to, rather than a doctor to treat them. That is your job too, for if you can lift some burden off their chest, you have done your job.

The conviction of humans and their ability to fight back never ceases to amaze you. There is the patient who has Laurence Moon Biedel syndrome. She is just 17 but she's totally blind. She refuses to carry a stick and walks remarkably close behind her mother who is a teacher. She can't stay home alone so she walks with her five kilometres to the mother's school and then comes back with her. She has undergone hysterectomy because she is unable to look after herself during her menstruation and yet every time she enters the clinic it's with a smiling face, without ever a frown on her forehead.

There is the boy who has come to you with fever, he has lost both his upper limbs to electrocution, but you find out that he still goes to school and is a student of grade 9. He uses his feet to write out in the exams. He has a mother who is a single parent and who looks after her children the bravery of a soldier. You salute the resolute boy and are in awe of the mothers training for bringing up a child with such great conviction. You scrutinize your own heart and find yourself shallow for the trivial things that bring discontentment. Can your troubles even match his in any way?

These people teach you how strong we are and the only limitations that we have are those that we set for ourselves.

Studded here and there are tales of happiness. When your patient with anti-phospholipid syndrome conceives after 12 years and successfully delivers a baby, you want to jump with joy. Your patient who was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and tuberculosis at 12 years of age comes to visit you in hospital 15 years later. He is now working as an engineer and is absolutely healthy. The beep of a monitor depicting the heartbeat which has come back after a stressful resuscitation, is a sound which is music to your ears. The patient who has

come in a comatose state and after days of challenging work is now sitting up on the bed smiling. The patient with tuberculous meningitis who comes for follow up after six months and prays for you with his hands raised to the sky. There are those who teach you grace in adversity, the family who thanks you even when their father passes away, knowing that we tried our best. The son who comes from Skardu once a year to thank you because you took care of his ailing father who is no more.

Our life is a life of lessons. A life so enriched that every moment can be revered. A life that makes us wise before our time, acknowledging that 'wisdom is oftentimes nearer when we stoop, than when we soar'. Let us embrace our life it all with its beauty, splendour, sadness, and love.

The road of life passes through the most scenic of lush green valleys, with rolling foothills stretching to the

horizon. The path is lined by the most fragrant flowers in vivid colours. Butterflies flutter past resting occasionally to draw nectar from the florets, and the birds sit on branches of dense trees chirping merrily away. The sky is as blue as a sapphire, and the clouds float by like balls of cotton. The breeze kisses your face, and you hear the rustling sound of leaves as they dance in the gust of wind. We choose to run past this picturesque path, wishing it to lead us to a destination we know nothing about but believe to be far more magnificent and in doing so miss the splendour of what encompasses us. Take the time to smell the flowers, listen to the bird's song, breathe in the fresh air, and let the eyes rest on the azure sky.

As Rumi said and I quote: 'I learned that every mortal would taste death, But only some will taste life.'