The Taste of Lemonade on a Summer Afternoon

Every one in a while, you appreciate just being someplace. The location need not be exotic. The event need not be earth-shaking. The moment in history need not be defining.

It is just a place. At a certain time. And it is important to you.

I experienced this sensation recently on a Friday night. It was an hour before the fall Convocation for first-year medical students at the Medical College of Ohio where I serve as president and chief executive officer.

My staff had arranged for me to meet informally with the new students in our outdoors Commons area before the Convocation. I arrived early, before the students had been released from their morning orientation session.

The Commons was green and full of late-summer flowers. A fountain splashing water was the only sound. There was a light breeze.

I uncovered one of the punch bowls that had been set out and helped myself to a cup of lemonade.

The taste of lemonade brought me no profound Proustian remembrance. But it did make me feel alive at that moment.

Just nine months earlier, on Christmas Day, I had first passed some blood. At the time, I remembered that I had fallen Christmas Eve while unpacking some books and bumped the costovertebral area on my right side. I assumed that the hematuria resulted from minor trauma.

However, I knew that the potentially more serious conditions of tumor or kidney stone were probable because the trauma was trivial. The fact that I felt no renal colic led me to believe that my problem was not a stone. I was worried about a tumor.

I decided not to seek treatment because of the holiday and to see if my condition improved. There was no hematuria the next two days. On Tuesday, I was back on campus; however, during a three-hour administrative meeting, I experienced excruciating back pain.

After the meeting, I went to the bathroom and attempted to urinate. I could only pass blood and blood clots. Fortunately, my personal physician was also attending the meeting. After examining the hematuria, he consulted with our chairperson of urology and they agreed that a CT scan should immediately be taken of my abdomen.

The scan showed no definite evidence of tumor. However, the kidney was grossly enlarged from a suspected expanding hematoma. By this time it was 6 PM, and the staff at the Medical College Hospital had typed and cross-matched me for 4 units of blood to be used in case the hematoma ruptured. An aortogram was scheduled to rule out tumor.

Two intravenous catheters were placed in each of my arms. and I was given narcotics around the clock. The pain increased beyond the point at which drugs could provide relief. The pain caused a vasovagal reaction: my heart rate dropped to the 30s, and my systolic blood pressure fell to 60 mm Hg. Nurses called my physician, who pushed fluids to increase my blood pressure. An aortogram was performed, followed by chest films to check for metastases.

The chest films were normal, but the aortogram showed a tumor the size of an orange surrounded by hemorrhage in my kidney. I was taken straight to surgery, where, after I had been given general anesthesia and an epidural, my urologist removed my right kidney and adrenal gland.

My recovery was uneventful save for paresthesias of my feet, a transient complication of the epidural, and hypertension resulting from fluid overload. I was discharged after a week and was back to work full-time four days later.

Quickly, as the weeks passed, my life returned to normal and administrative and academic crises ebbed and flowed. But I found that things were not quite as they were before. I found that I had become more contemplative. Some months after my operation, in the introduction of the Mosby Year Books for which I serve as editor, I noted four "observations":

1. Good health is often taken for granted; however, it is the most precious commodity one possesses.
2. One's spouse, children, family, and friends are the essential ingredients that allow one to endure an experience such as a serious and potentially fatal illness.
3. When faced with death, one recognizes the importance of God and one's relationship to God.
4. The things one does throughout one's life that seem so urgent are, most of the time, not so important.

Now, sipping lemonade and waiting in the Commons for the new medical students, I thought of my Convocation speech folded in my inside coat pocket. It contained much of the usual rhetoric about medicine as a noble profession with its great demands and equally great rewards.

However, the speech also contained two literary references that I would not and perhaps could not have used a year ago. Only after my own illness and recovery have I come to fully understand the meanings embedded in the words of Thornton Wilder and Henry David Thoreau.

Thornton Wilder's quintessential American drama Our Town has three acts that represent in order birth, marriage, and death. The acts almost read as a medical school curriculum outline. In the third act, the young wife Emily, who has died in childbirth, returns to observe her family and friends in Grover's Corners. Seeing how little time people take to enjoy life, she asks in a contemplative moment: "They don't—understand—do they?"

I would suggest to the students in my speech that they must find the time to balance the scientific with the humanistic. To find not only time but also the energy to be with family and friends and to enjoy the arts or a good novel or a fine dinner. I would emphasize that this is critical not only for emotional well-being, but also to balance the rush and impact of scientific knowledge. Thoreau, even at the very beginning of the Industrial Age, observed the growing frantic pace of life and wrote in Walden that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

Now, in the sunlit Commons, the first students hurried toward me, ignoring the flowers and fountains but intent on keeping to their orientation schedule. I wondered how much of my speech would get through to them. I wondered if they would understand the meaning behind the Wilder and Thoreau quotes, that despite the frenetic pace of modern medicine, it is still essential to pause and appreciate life and maybe remember the taste of lemonade on a summer afternoon.

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