

A Selfless Goodbye

By Pooja Reddy

As a teenager, typical Sunday mornings in my household often revolved around repetitious lectures on how I either stayed out too late or needed to clean my “warzone” of a bedroom. I grew so accustomed to my father’s Sunday sermons that I developed a routine. After a few casual head nods, an apology, and an empty promise that next time I’d be home before ten, the conversation would shift and the day would progress. One conversation however, is still vivid in my memory.

After a particularly long discussion, my dad morbidly changed topics. Gathering my undivided attention he simply stated that should anything ever happen to him, his sincerest wishes were he “never wanted to be hooked up to a bunch of machines.” My father was in relatively good health, so his preemptive request to “go peacefully” took me by surprise. I didn’t make sense of it then, but years later it has become clear: what my father had expressed was that he did not want to experience “dying.” I imagine he viewed terminal diagnoses as impossibly hard on the family who remained behind, rather than an opportunity to prepare for goodbye. When his time came, he wanted it to be short, quick, and painless. He didn’t want to be a burden. He didn’t want to have us worry or emotionally suffer along with him.

What a noble view, I thought; how unselfish it was of my father to once again put the comfort of his family above even his own mortality. I agreed. I didn’t want to be a burden either. It was a depressing topic, but I was at ease in my mind. As with several other beliefs, I shared this desire with my dad, to never be “hooked up to a bunch of machines.” For years I held this opinion. I almost sympathized with stories of euthanasia.

That all changed during one trauma call at Grady Hospital. Shortly after dusk, a middle-aged man was brought into the trauma bay unconscious. His white t-shirt was stained a deep violent red. He lay still, motionless. Physicians swarmed about him, methodically assessing his situation with such precision and prowess I imagined the launch sequence of a space shuttle.

It was a tragic scene. I overheard the EMS technician providing his report to the receiving physician. The man had been found on the side of the highway, likely hit by a car. “How long do you think he was there?” “I don’t know.” “Any ID?” “Nothing.” I turned back to the trauma bay to a now shirtless man tangled in tubes, cords and wires. I watched as they struggled to intubate him. He was not breathing on his own.

The team tried to minimize the blood loss. I think I held his leg in position, or wiped the floor, or did some other task that medical students perform in chaotic situations. Intensely, I struggled to concentrate on the process; the steps; the professional demeanor of my superiors. But I couldn’t. Instead, I replayed the scene of the accident in my mind. How long had he lay there? Where was he going? Did he get in a fight with his wife that morning? Did he raise his voice? Where was his family? Were they waiting for him to come home for dinner? There were too many questions left unanswered. The man was dying, and no one even knew.

I thought back to my father. I reflected on our shared view of selflessly leaving this world quickly and not wanting or letting anyone agonize over a long departure. I always viewed his wishes as a sacrifice, as an unselfish way to leave the world.

But in the end, what is worse? The final ten minutes of worrying, wishing and regretting, or an extra three months of pain and suffering? I imagined this man's family at the dinner table staring at an empty chair. They would be robbed of the closure they needed. Wasn't that selfish? Or, as I imagined this man's last minutes, likely filled with thoughts of what he could have and should have done differently. Wasn't that tragic?

Unexpectedly, this experience left me with more questions than answers. Morbid as it may be, I was once so certain I would be making "things easy" by being painfully clear about my wishes. As I learn to broach these sensitive subjects with families, often with healthy patients, I struggle to reconcile my humanistic instinct to end suffering with my desire to comfort loved ones. The family needs to say goodbye.

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