

The Little Nowhere of the Mind

By Kenneth Weinberg

My grandfather, Mischa Weinberg, made house calls.

He had emigrated from Russia in the early 1900's, put himself through Fordham Medical School by working as a motorman on the BMT subway, done his internship at Beth Israel Hospital in Newark and then, in the summer of 1920, set up a practice as a General Practitioner in that New Jersey city. He would see patients at the office in the front of his home during the morning, do his hospital rounds and then, every afternoon, he would get into his battered Packard sedan to visit sick and injured families in their homes in the predominately Jewish and later black communities of that resilient, ever-changing metropolis. It was a routine he continued until 1963, the year he died.

My great uncle Marvin (supposedly the first baby ever delivered by Mischa), whose family spent a lot of time at Mischa's home in Newark, had told me years ago that after going out on his calls my grandfather would come home late in the evening to his wife and four children, and frequently a cold supper as well, put his hand in his pocket and pull out wads of crumpled one and five dollar bills, money taken from those who could afford to pay (family lore had it that he never charged those who couldn't).

Forty-five years later, after being an Emergency Medicine physician for 25 years, I found myself following in Mischa's footsteps, seeing homebound elderly patients in Bergen County, NJ and treating foreign tourists in NYC who required acute medical care. Having begun this second medical career at the age of 59, no longer married, daughter away at college, I would come home late from my calls to an empty apartment, no food in the fridge and the only bills coming from my pocket were insurance forms to be sent in for reimbursement.

One of these house calls took place on a sunny fall afternoon when I was notified about a patient who needed to be seen for pain in his left heel. I drove to the Upper West Side of Manhattan, entered a large building on West End Avenue and was met at the apartment door by a retired Scottish gastroenterologist. He and his wife, also a retired MD, had just flown to New York City to see their newborn grandchild and were staying in the spacious, bright, Pre-War apartment of their son and daughter-in-law. The previous day my patient and his wife had taken a bus tour to Greenwich Village, then decided to walk back uptown. On the morning I saw him he had awakened with severe pain in the back of his foot. Unsure of what was causing his problem he had called his insurance company to get medical help. He recounted this all to me when I arrived and, after examining him, I found I didn't have a clear answer to his

problem either. I was concerned, however, that after his long walk he could have a fracture so I made arrangements for an X-ray to be taken later in the day. When I left I told him I'd let him know as soon as I received the results and we would make a treatment plan from there.

That evening I got the radiologists' reading. My patient's pain was caused not by a fracture but by a bony outgrowth of the heel bone—a calcaneal “spur.” I called him and discussed the treatment—steroids injected into the area of the calcaneus, which I could do the following day.

When I arrived that afternoon I began my ministrations by drawing up my medication into a syringe. He lay prone on the bed, his wife placed towels under his leg in the makeshift surgical suite we arranged in the guest bedroom, and then he bent his knee and lifted his foot. As I scrubbed the heel with antiseptic, numbed it and then injected the steroids we plunged back into a conversation from the day before about a shared interest in literature, and writing we had done, and he mentioned a piece of his had just been published in *The British Medical Journal* (BMJ).

The article was a review of a book, *Tea with Walter de la Mare*, written by the British neurologist Lord Brain (a man whose name seemed to leave little doubt as to what his calling in life would be), talking of the relationship that developed between two men of differing backgrounds: Brain, the renowned British physician and de la Mare, a poet and writer of fiction and essays on mind and spirit. I had heard of Lord Russell Brain, barely, but I drew a blank on de la Mare.

I wrapped up the foot, and our literary discussion, told my patient to call if there were any problems and went home, nearly forgetting about the encounter. But something about what he had said piqued my curiosity and not long afterwards I found and read his article in the BMJ, tracked him down online and we began to correspond via email. I investigated and discovered that Brain, knighted for his many accomplishments in medicine (his textbook *Brain Diseases of the Nervous System* was standard reading for medical students in the UK for many years) was also very interested in the mind and psyche. He had come upon a book of de la Mare's that contained an essay on the Bloomsbury poet Rupert Brooke in which Brooke had used the phrase “the little nowhere of the mind,” referring to that ineluctable region between mind and body.

When Brain saw that phrase he “recognized a fellow spirit,” as my Scottish patient put it, tried to locate the quote but couldn't find it in any of Brooke's poetry. He contacted de la Mare and in the course of that writer's investigation (during which it turned out the phrase was actually “the little nowhere of the brain”) a correspondence developed. Not long afterwards, in the early 1950's, Brain and de la Mare moved into the town of Twickenham in southwest London. De la Mare invited Brain for Sunday tea and over a number of years the two met and a friendship developed as they discussed topics such as painting, literature, ghosts and, not surprisingly, the realms between mind and body.

My patient had come upon Brain's account of this relationship in the book “Tea with de la Mare” (including the fact that Brain had been invited to see de la Mare for a last chat the night before the poet died) and was so taken by, as he said, “the privilege to eavesdrop on the

private conversations of such men” that he had written his article about it in the British journal.

All of this ruminated in my own brain for a month or so and then I realized I had to pursue these titillating tidbits. I read Wikipedia and other online references to Brain, de la Mare and Brooke; found myself ordering *Tea with Walter de la Mare*, long out of print (though an original edition was available); learned that not only had Brain been a pre-eminent neurologist, an editor of the journal *Brain*, and had a reflex named after him, but that he had written extensively about medical aspects of the work of authors such as Dickens, Swift and Samuel Johnson.

Intrigued, I researched further and learned all I could about de la Mare. I found that not only was he a poet but also a writer of books for children as well as adults, including one published in 1922, *Memoirs of a Midget*. I subsequently bought that book (not an original edition) and while immersed in reading about the life of a very small young woman began wondering if, since *Memoirs* predated by a few years, *Stuart Little*, E.B. White could have been influenced by it (in subsequent correspondence with a writer who had been close to White, I was told that even though White had most likely read *Memoirs* his own book was purely autobiographical).

Because of de la Mare’s interest in matters of philosophy and spirituality he had written an essay in his book, *Pleasures and Speculation*, which contained the phrase by Rupert Brooke that was the pebble in the pond whose ripple first reached Brain, then my patient, and ultimately, nearly 100 years later, me.

But if I had thought Brain or de la Mare were interesting and current, when I looked into Rupert Brooke I was astonished by the fact this man, described by William Butler Yeats as “the handsomest young man in England” at the turn of the last century; an athlete and academic who won a scholarship to Cambridge; quoted extensively by the British for his “war” poetry (though his warrior ethos seemed questionable at best); and, buried in a lonely and haunting, dutifully marked grave on a hillside on the Greek island of Spyros (he died aboard a naval ship in the Mediterranean during WWI) had created many more ripples than just the one that resonated with me. His line “Well this side of Paradise...there’s little comfort in the wise” inspired F. Scott Fitzgerald; his poetry was quoted by Radar on the TV series MASH; included in lyrics by Pink Floyd and Fleetwood Mac; and, as recently as 1981, sixty-six years after his death, the movie *Making Love* with Kate Jackson used his work, naming the child born to Jackson’s character after him.

While most of my house calls are of a more mundane and less engaging nature than this one, never before, or since, sending me on such a literary and intellectual odyssey, or allowing me to see fine scholarly distinctions among my friends (only one even knew who Rupert Brooke was and—something I’d just discovered myself—that he had gone skinny dipping with Virginia Woolf) I did began to wonder if Mischa ever had had this kind of experience with his house call patients.

One of the remaining relatives who knew my grandfather well is my father’s youngest brother Martin. While speaking of his father recently, Martin told me that as a youngster he would sit

in the car waiting when his father did many of his house calls and how, one hot summer night after watching his father trudge down from a third floor walk-up he asked if he had been paid for the visit. He was told by Mischa, “If they say ‘Doc how much do I owe you,’ I’ll tell them a price I know they can afford. If they don’t ask as I’m heading towards the door, I know they have no money and I won’t bring the subject up.”

Though I was brought up knowing my grandfather was a Talmudic scholar turned atheist I don’t get a sense of whether he ever had the time or interest to pursue these types of literary expeditions. My feeling is he had barely a moment to do more than schlep up and down the stairs in the apartments of the working class families he was serving; provide them with the excellent care I heard about from others when I was growing up; take their crumpled dollars, or not; and treat them with the compassion and wisdom I remember him showing me when he fought my recurrent childhood bouts of tonsillitis, giving me penicillin injections on many occasions, and refusing, correctly, to allow my tonsils to be taken out. So while he probably never was spurred by a patient visit to explore the type of ground I’ve been covering I’m certain he walked out of most of his encounters feeling satisfied, feeling he had helped someone; by dint of his personality and compassion and expertise had made someone feel better or have less pain.

That is what we share. It is what bridges the gap between our generations and years and the grave and gives my trips to patients’ homes an added, deeply enriching poignancy.

Kenneth Weinberg is a doctor in Urgent Care in Brooklyn who also does house calls. He is on the board of Physicians for a National Health Program, advocating to get Single Payer, Universal Health Care instituted in the U.S. Dr. Weinberg continues to be involved in the Program in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University as well as doing photography in NYC and near his home in Old Chatham, NY.