

Cycle of life

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A wise colleague once told me you can never change what happens to people. You can only change how they experience it. And, they will always remember how they were treated when the event occurred.

Tonight, I was called to the hospital from home to see a mom in labour. I'm tired and exhausted but this is the best part of what I do. How could I be cranky welcoming new life into the world. Her contractions are not that strong yet, but I'm expecting a fast labour. I decide to stay.

A short distance away in the hospital, my patient's mother is dying. I know the pain of her mother's illness is much harder for my patient to bear than her labour pains. I encourage her to leave the labour suite to be with her mother.

I walk down the hall and meet a friend I've known since residency. "Hughie is in," she tells me. Her husband, the sweetest man you will ever meet, has leukemia. Many times it has almost killed him. Many times he almost gave up hope. I looked after him 3 years ago. It was brief but, tonight, he tells me the effect I had on him. Tears rolling down his face he tells me I "saved his life" that day.

I'm trying to process all this. He makes me feel like a rock star. I struggle. My contribution to Hughie's care really wasn't much, I thought. I know very little about his complex disease and had no treatment plan to offer. But Hughie didn't care about that. I'm his "angel," he tells me.

I return to the delivery unit, now the tears are running down my face. The nurses ask, "What's wrong?" I explain the meeting and that I'm trying to absorb the compliment, savour the moment.

Back in the maternity unit the mom's labour pains are strong. A beautiful baby will soon be born, a new life, a new opportunity. I think of her mom—the new grandmother who is dying. Not every family member understands her dire situation. I'm not sure even she knows. My instinct tells me she does. She's trying to keep strong.

I get home; I'm tired. Exhausted. So little time until it starts all over again. All my children are asleep—"angels," I think. I kiss and hug them all then slide into a warm bed. So tired I can't even think. Nothing in my mind. Just blank. Not until the morning can I process last night's events. And, I feel grateful to be a part of it all.

*Once in a while, I feel so small
Like a particle in the Universe
I know so little and control nothing
But here I am.*

*So many hours and sacrifices
A job, sometimes thankless and exhausting,
can be rewarded with the smallest gesture
Affirming
I have made a difference.*

*Impending grief
Fear for the future
How long does she have?
Will she suffer?*

*I gave him hope to keep going
That day, he said.
He stopped letting the disease run his life
He enjoyed every hour as though it were his last
He stopped worrying about tomorrow.*

*So many times, I am awake all night
And show up for work
A patient, frustrated I wasn't on time.
It deflates me; I want to run the other way.
I try to be strong. It's not easy.
The harder I work, the less people are happy
Family and friends abandoned
Patients disappointed or feeling short-changed
and me, just plain depleted
but I find a way back
and it starts with a simple moment, a "thank you"
the small gesture.
The affirmation.*

*And life will go on.
She will be missed
She cared, she blessed
so many lives.*

*And baby is here
A beautiful girl
The beginning of a story.*

Twinkle in the sky little star.

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