



## Memories of Christmas past

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The cardboard box in my basement doesn't look any different from the other cardboard boxes labeled "Christmas decorations." But each holiday season when I open *this* particular box I am overcome with memories and emotions as I remember the patients who have given me the treasures inside. Each item, from crocheted bells to hand-embroidered towels to ornaments from home countries, reminds me of a wonderful person. Some of the givers are no longer alive but they live on in my memory.

On top is a teddy-bear stocking given to me when my third daughter was born. As I take it out, I am overwhelmed with memories of Mr B., one of my first patients in my current practice.

I was pretty green when I first encountered Mr B. I had been in private practice for only 2 years when I joined the academic teaching unit at Memorial University in St John's, Nfld; in my first clinic there, I met Mr B. I had been warned beforehand that he was a difficult patient—a narcotic seeker who was always phoning the on-call service or going to the emergency room. He had been through many doctors in the city, and I was next in line. At least that is what my colleagues had been telling him for 3 months before my arrival: "There's a new doctor coming, and she's going to be your new doctor." The combination of a relatively inexperienced physician and a patient with a reputation for being manipulative and demanding was hardly an auspicious foundation for a doctor-patient relationship, and I entered the room that day with some trepidation. As it turned out, though, my relationship with Mr B. was a great learning experience.

From Mr B., I learned first-hand of the power of the human spirit. He had severe cerebral palsy and had been a very sick baby, not expected to live. In those days, woodstoves had warming trays, and this was where his parents kept him as a baby to keep warm. Lo

and behold, he survived, although he would face much adversity. As a young child, because he was so often sick, he was never sent to school for fear he would catch some illness that would "be the end of him." As a result, he never learned to read or write. His illiteracy and his disability led to merciless teasing in his youth and young adulthood. His life was spent in and out of hospitals and he had undergone various surgeries.

When I met him, Mr B. was in his 60s and had been going from emergency room to emergency room. He had no family support system and was very lonely. However, once we had established that I would be his doctor and set up regular, often weekly, appointments, he settled down. I didn't do much other than listen, but this was actually all he wanted. He had a story to tell and he needed someone to hear it—and to care. He didn't complain or feel sorry for himself; he just wanted to speak and be heard. I discovered that he was a very intelligent man who had accomplished a great deal and I often wondered what he could have done if given the opportunity of education.

My third child was born just before Christmas one year, and I went home from the hospital the same day. That night I received a call from a nurse on the hospital's obstetrics floor, informing me that I had had a visitor who had dropped off something for me. My husband picked up the package—it was the teddy-bear stocking for my new daughter, from one Mr B. For someone with little money,

this had obviously cost a great deal, and to me it was priceless.

Mr B. died a couple of years ago, but each year when I take out the Christmas decorations, I see the stocking and remember Mr B., his life, and his story; he lives on in my memory.

Another precious gift in the box is a group of ornaments handmade from cotton balls. Each year, Ms L. gave me a different cotton-ball animal, and now I have a whole collection.



Ms L. had a progressive, degenerative neuromuscular disorder. It was a genetic disease, and she had seen her brother die of the same condition when he was a teenager. She also had a history of terrible sexual abuse as a child and young woman.

When I met her, Ms L. was in her 30s and was a beautiful, vibrant woman, despite being disabled by weakness that confined her to a wheelchair. She constantly struggled to maintain her independence; Social Services wanted her to be placed in a nursing home (as she needed 24-hour care), but she was a young woman, so full of life in spite of her failing body. I, and others, wrote many letters to Social Services and other agencies on her behalf, and, thankfully, Ms L. was able to maintain her own home until her death.

What always struck me about Ms L. was her *joie de vivre*. Despite all the adversity, she truly treasured life, savouring every moment. She really did live life to the fullest. I know that some people looked at her and wondered what quality of life she could possibly have had, but I can honestly say it was a better quality of life than most able-bodied people have—all because she loved every minute. Ms L. took nothing for granted and was an unfailing advocate for the disabled. She was one of the most inspirational people I have ever met and I will never forget her.

Each Christmas, Ms L. brought me a new homemade decoration. Her disorder prevented her from assembling the decorations herself, but each one was her own design, and she instructed her caregiver where to put each cotton ball, eye, and hat. Every year



I take out the little mice and polar bears and arrange them on the piano. While Ms L. is no longer with us, these little creatures remind me of her, so full of joy and happiness, and I celebrate the privilege of having known her.

At Christmas, if you come to my house and look around, it might not be a Martha Stewart vignette you see, but rather a host of special objects, each one bearing witness to an amazing life. I give thanks for being in a profession that allows me the privilege of being part of those lives. We are all truly blessed. ❁

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#### **Competing interests**

*None declared*

