

## Going home

Rob Boulay MD CCFP

I can't really begin to tell you what an honour it is for me to have been asked to give the keynote address for the History and Narrative session of Family Medicine Forum.\* I don't know if you are aware that the College Executive always divvies up various meetings during this week so that we can have executive members at as many meetings as possible—let me tell you that this session is among the most sought after. I was happy that I would have a bye this year—I had to be the one who came here! I have always found it extremely inspirational to be able to listen to my peers as they recount stories from their family medicine lives. I usually bring tissues with me—I almost never leave without shedding a tear, and I've already had tears in my eyes as I've listened to the wonderful stories of our award winners.

Stories have always figured importantly in my life—family events were always rich with opportunities for sharing experiences. Really, we were building a narrative family history. My earliest recollections are of family gatherings: my mom had 13 siblings and my dad was from a family of 15. You can well imagine that family reunions were noisy affairs! I learned very early that storytelling—and listening—provided countless hours of entertainment, forging relationships and connecting people. I also learned that, over time, the lines that separated truth from fiction became fuzzy, as stories became legend. Like the story of my dad's father who fell off the barn roof when he was 80, breaking his leg. Accounts vary as to how much wine had been consumed that day. It didn't really slow him down much, as he lived to 106! Or the story of my great-grandmother who was struck and killed by a car as she crossed the road in a snowstorm—by the only car that went through the village that day! I think I inherited her luck. I'm sure I could have the only lottery ticket for a draw and still find a way to lose. I was always intrigued by the story of my mom's 3 siblings who died in infancy. They had appeared healthy at birth, but then developed feeding difficulties and peculiar, high-pitched cries. I'm fairly convinced that they must have had a genetic disorder, reinforced by the fact that approximately 25% of the family was affected. My *mémère*, who is now in her 90s,

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tells of being at first terrified, and then so relieved, as each of her subsequent children were born and grew older without this affliction. Her incredible faith, along with my *pépère's* unwavering persistence, ensured that she kept having children well into her late 40s.

I've often wondered how these and many other such stories shaped me into who I am today. I am certain that they had a considerable effect on me. My career choice, my style of parenting, the development of an admittedly quirky sense of humour are all the result of my family. There were times we would literally laugh until we cried, sometimes laughing *at* but most often laughing *with* one another. And in case some of you are wondering about my laugh, it's just like *mon oncle Gabriel's*—you can always tell when either of us is in the building! Although northern New Brunswick could be a very rough place when I grew up there, I really think that where I grew up and who I grew up with gave me an important perspective on rural life, community support, and the vital importance of family and feeling connected.

### Getting here

Now that you have a bit of an idea of where I come from, I would like to recount a few short stories, brief accounts of some people who have touched my life in very special ways and who have helped produce the current version of Robert Boulay who stands before you today. As Leah Raye Mabry, the outgoing Chairperson of the Congress of Delegates of the American Academy of Family Physicians said at their recent annual meeting: "When you see a turtle on a fence post, you know it didn't get there by itself." Now, I thought of trying to translate this into a more Canadian version—"When you see a porcupine in a lobster trap" or "When you see a farmer in the long-gun registry"—but I really like Leah Raye's Texas version. She also said "I'm on hormones and I'm packin'!" but I didn't think that quote really applied to me! None of us gets to be who we are or where we are without many helping and guiding hands along the way. These are but a few of the people who helped put this turtle on this podium.

Patrick Donahoe was the Dean of Men at Dalhousie University when I was an undergraduate student there. In my third year I applied for and got a position as a Resident's Assistant, and he was my boss. About a month into my term, Pat and his wife, Susan, had me over to supper one night—they were, and still are, a very gracious couple. They broached a very sensitive topic with me, one which had been a source of much embarrassment over the years: my dentition. I had been blessed with very crooked teeth and a horrible bite. My parent's incomes

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had not permitted them to afford such luxuries as braces. After many discussions, Pat, Susan, and Ann, one of their colleagues, arranged to pay for my braces and surgery. All I had to do in return was promise to pay it forward and do a similar deed for someone when I could afford it. My wife, Bernadette, and I were able to grant the same gift to a young man we met a few years ago. We hope he'll be able to keep this tradition of kindness going.

My next story is about a friendship that I've developed over the past few years. Since my involvement with the College I've met many wonderful people—colleagues from across Canada and beyond and the many excellent individuals who work at our national office. I couldn't have gotten through this year without Dr Cal Gutkin. I have learned so much from and about this man—how he loves his wife and family, and how he has devoted himself and his family to this thing, the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC). He is, quite literally, never at a loss for words. He is quick with an answer to any question, but never rash in his thinking. During this past year, as we sat around various tables, I'd sometimes feel the heat start to rise at the back of my neck as someone said something that made my blood boil. Let me assure you that if Cal ever got angry on these occasions, he never showed it. His responses were always calm and measured; he was always a gentleman and was often able to use humour strategically to defuse stressful situations. I'm not the same person that I was a year ago when I assumed the presidency. I think this has been a change for the better; I guess time will tell. I do know that many of the personhood upgrades I've accrued along the way are attributable to Cal. It is with no small measure of pride and humility that I call him my friend, and I thank him for all that he has done for all of us.

I would now like to share a story with you that I wrote many years ago; it was written at a creative writing session that I attended at Family Medicine Forum several years ago that was facilitated by Dr Eric Cadesky from Vancouver, BC. I'd like to extend a special thank-you to Eric for having given me the courage to put pen to paper and write about my experiences. This story is about a house call I did that touched me deeply.

### First kiss

We were ushered into the room. Late afternoon sunlight streamed into the makeshift bedroom. It had been their dining room, a place for family celebrations, now transformed into a shrine to the translucent form that barely made a bulge under the starched, white sheets. "She's resting now." Slow shallow breaths, dry lips, withered skin. I walked to the bedside and moved a stack of old books from a chair—I sat down, reached over, and gently took her hand. At first, nothing; then her eyes opened. Initial fear, eyes darting around as if to ask "Am I still here?" Then light blue eyes settled upon me. A wide smile, dentures too big for a mouth that was


shrinking. "Hello Millie." "Hello Father." She had always called me *father* instead of *doctor*, though we had both previously agreed I was much less than priestlike.

Tension broken; everyone laughs. Questions of pain, comfort, eating, and bodily functions follow. "How much longer, do you think?" she asks. "Not long," I answer. "Nothing more I need," she says. I get up to leave—I lean forward and kiss her on the forehead. Her smile fills the room. "Our first kiss!" she exclaims, drawing smiles and tears from everyone within listening distance. "Better than if it was the Pope," she continues, but then a flash of concern crosses her face. "Better take that one back; I'll have to explain myself soon."

We leave the room, say our final goodbyes, and walk into the fading daylight. We are quiet. Once in the truck, I hand the medical student a Kleenex, take one myself, and we drive silently back to town.

### Home again

So, it turns out that I have one more story to tell—my final tale. It is about enduring love. When I was asked if I would let my name stand to be President of the CFPC, the first person I asked was my best friend, my soul mate, Bernadette McCarthy. Some time later, she told me that I have a lot to learn about informed consent—that she didn't get full disclosure of just how much time the President spends on the road. We had another conversation a few weeks ago. We had a rare quiet meal alone and reflected on how the year had been. She admitted that she hadn't been happy at all with my absences early in my mandate, but that as the year went on she grew more and more confident that she and our children, Daniel, Emma, and Sam, could do everything they had to without me. She didn't intend to say this in a mean way—she was very proud of how independent she and the children had become, how my time away had actually fostered this independence, and how, in the end, it had made us stronger as a family. We went on to discuss that we now understand that either of us can follow our dreams with the security of knowing that, at the end of every road, the other will be waiting. Of all the gifts I have received, both this past year and in all the years before, although I've traveled countless miles and met hundreds, if not thousands, of wonderful people, this was the greatest gift of all—the knowledge that I really always can come back home again.

In closing, I want to sincerely thank Dr Bill Schragge and AMS for their amazing support of the History and Narrative Sessions and Awards, and the CFPC, for giving us all this wonderful opportunity to tell our stories. 

**Dr Boulay** is a family physician in Miramichi, NB, and Past President of the College of Family Physicians of Canada.

**Competing interests**  
None declared