



Art of Family Medicine

Hope

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Dum spiro spero
(While I breathe, I hope)

Hope is optimistic, an anticipation of a positive outcome. It has many forms. I hope the Canadian junior hockey team wins. I hope there will be an end to world suffering.

Hope can be an integral part of the healing process.

When Barack Obama wrote *The Audacity of Hope* he was in the US Senate, about to make his bid for the presidency.¹ He was looking at hope on the big screen. In the prologue he writes that the people of the United States have

more that binds them together than drives them apart and that if enough people believe in the truth of that proposition and act on it, then we might not solve every problem, but we can get something meaningful done.¹

This does seem to be an audacious hope, as his presidential successor is poised to dismantle much of what President Obama did during his 2 terms in office. His accomplishments seem to be in ruins but his legacy might be triumphant. The time frame for his hope extends into the future. According to Donald Phillips, "Abraham Lincoln was slandered, libeled, and hated perhaps more intensely than any man ever to run for the nation's highest office."² History is the final arbiter.

Obama also comments on dashed hopes and the importance of moving on to more sustainable pursuits. If you do not, you might become "bitter, quarrelsome and slightly pathetic."¹

"Timepiece," by the Czech-Canadian-American poet Jana Prikryl, is written in iambic dimeter, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable with 2 metrical feet per line. The meter suggests the *tick-tock* of a clock or the *lub-dub* of a heartbeat, the passage of time and the passage of life. The poem draws the reader's attention to the importance of hope and hopelessness and finally the emptiness of hope when it is actually seen.

There's always hope.
It grows on trees.³

Dan Chiasson says in his commentary on the poem, "The poem veers from the pattern in its last line Hope vanishes the moment it becomes ubiquitous: 'It grows on trees' is what we say of something so common as to be worthless."⁴

Hope and tribulation

There are biblical references to hope. St Paul, in his letter to the Romans, reflects on the same notion that hope seen is not hope. "For we are saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?"⁵ In the same letter, St Paul comments on the theological relationship of faith and grace and the role hope plays when faced with tribulation. "We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character and character, hope."⁶

Colin's story

I inherited a patient I will call Colin. I knew that he was a well respected university professor and that he had had a heart attack, the culmination of a very stressful family tragedy.

One summer morning while on sabbatical I met him quite by accident in the Public Record Office in Kew, England. We had lunch together in Kew Gardens, where he told me about his research and then a little about his background. He said, "From an early age I was passionate about history. I was diligent and was rewarded with a master's degree from Cambridge and a PhD from the University of London.

"Along the way I fell in love with a beautiful girl who shared my interests. She invited me to meet her family. They were—how shall I put it?—socially conscious and made it quite clear that my origins were not up to scratch. For my part I was supremely confident in my achievements and perhaps I was guilty of reverse snobbery. At any rate, I chose to avoid them. Perhaps if I had gotten to know them better I would have learned something important, but I was in love and that was what mattered then. We married without her family's blessing and started our family, a daughter and a son. I was invited to teach in Canada and we moved there, where I have spent most of my professional life.

"My wife had a secret—a family secret that she hadn't shared with me."

Colin looked at his watch. "This morning I found some correspondence from the British Colonial Office on Tanganyika. I must get back to it. Undoubtedly we will cross paths back home."

We commented on our chance meeting and said our goodbyes. I went off to see some spectacular water lilies in the Kew Gardens and never did get back to the Public Record Office.

When I returned home I got to know Colin and his story. His wife's family had an uncommon, poorly understood

dominant genetic disorder. The signs and symptoms of their family disease, affecting 1 in 2 offspring, became apparent in early adulthood. At first the neurologic expression of the disease was fleeting and could be dismissed or denied. Then the tremors, unsteadiness, and weakness became debilitating, and eventually the person, with a perfectly intact intellect, became trapped in a body that was totally incapacitated.

Colin's wife had the disease.

I understood his tribulation. He had to care for a wife who became more demanding and irascible as her physical function deteriorated. He had to care for their 2 children, all the while knowing they might share her fate. He had a career and a home to maintain, fiscal responsibilities, and a family that was distant. He merely put his head down and kept going until he had a heart attack. By this time his wife was totally incapacitated. She wanted to return to England. Arrangements were made. She was flown home and died within the year.

Colin recovered, his career blossomed, and his children remained healthy and were successfully launched. It was about this time that I became Colin's family doctor.


I knew a student of his who told me about one of Colin's approaches to teaching. If students handed in average, poor, or failing assignments, Colin would outline how they could improve their grades. If they took the time to follow his advice and resubmit the assignments they would see their mistakes, correct them, and get better marks. A very important lesson in motivation

and reinforcing proper technique. It is also an example of tribulation, perseverance, character, and hope.

Hope and fear

In 1993 the first ataxia gene, *SCA1* (spinocerebellar ataxia type 1), was identified.⁷ I saw Colin later that year and inquired about his children. He said, "They are both doing well. My daughter is married and has a daughter and a son, but both my children are approaching the age when their mother had the first signs of the disease." I asked him how he coped with this fear.

"I think about this a lot. My hope and comfort is in medical science. They have identified the gene. They will be able to modify it and my children and grandchildren will not have to live in fear and dread."

This is the sustaining power of hope. 

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Competing interests

None declared

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