



Hope for Superman

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It was garnet red, saturating through both my underwear and my pants. As red and unexpected as a stop sign signaling one to halt. At any other time it would have been just awkward, but at 26 weeks' gestation, it was a threat. I should have been frightened, but that was not the first feeling I sensed. Instead, I'm embarrassed to now share that the reflexive thought that flooded my consciousness was *how inconvenient!* I felt annoyed, vexed at this sudden ill health thwarting my efficiency. I remember sighing, weighing my options. That night I was to lead an interprofessional narrative medicine group, and before that, I had notes to finish, messages to tidy up, and rounds to do for my inpatients. There was no time to change clothes, let alone pop into OB triage to get this assessed.

The contractions started an hour later as I sat in front of the computer trying to type up the day's clinic visits. It was then I thought it might be prudent to head toward the city, where OB triage was housed, 45 minutes away from my rural practice. I know as you read this you are maybe wondering what sane person, let alone a physician, would delay seeking help to tidy up work, especially knowing the risks of bleeding at 26 weeks' gestation. But I did just that. And the only justification I have is that on the treadmill of life, juggling the demands of work, academic responsibilities, 2 other children, and an elderly parent, I had trained myself to keep going. I had taken my good health for granted, feeling invincible and immune to the ills of the world. Although the bleeding was downright disruptive, it would be merely a speed bump, I thought. But full stops in life throw you off track with such ferocious force that the gravity of reality precipitously settles in. Its power obliges you to face the truth, to feel the rawness of life again with all its sorrow, thrills, and wonder.

Those wretched 18 hours in the delivery room, where truth came crashing down like waves, over and over, until I was unable to breathe, allowed me to give in to its terror and become alive again. I cried for the first time in a very long while and sudden regret filled me. *What was I thinking!* I had been given a gift, a surprise blessing at age 40, and I had taken it all for granted.

Dr Thornton's story is the winning story of the 2017 Mimi Divinsky Award for History and Narrative in Family Medicine sponsored by the Foundation for Advancing Family Medicine of the College of Family Physicians of Canada. This award is named in memory of the late Dr Mimi Divinsky for her role as a pioneer in narrative medicine in Canada. It recognizes the best submitted narrative account of experiences in family medicine.

Now I look back and realize that the experience of a partial placental abruption and threatened preterm labour bestowed upon me an endowment of sorts. One I intend to pass down to my children. The shroud of Herculean survival had been lifted, I was exposed as being simply human again. I needed that sucker-punch wake-up call. If only it had come sooner, I could have divorced myself from the burdens I carried with me: the grief of missing my children discover the world around them, the shame of not visiting my mother-in-law when she basked in remission, the weight of knowing I couldn't reclaim lost time. I would have recalibrated the metronome of life. In the language of music, I would have chosen a gentler tempo, one that allowed for the crescendos and diminuendos of day-to-day life to be truly heard and felt; one that tolerated balanced counterpoint instead of unforgiving ritardandos; one that defended new rhythms. If we only had *da capo al coda* in life, a chance to return to the beginning and play it over. But there are no repeats; the music simply marches on.

For a week I lay in that hospital bed and slept. It was a dreamless, restorative slumber. Life carried on around me: my husband continued to teach, our children went to school, my partners assumed the care of my patients. All the while, I healed. As a physician, mother, and spouse, it is difficult to write about personal vulnerability, infirmity, and frailty. These qualities are divergent from the evolved persona often created in medical school, embodied during residency, and perpetuated in a lifelong career. At home, I vowed assurances that I'd be there next time or we'd do that another day. In clinical encounters I whispered words of comfort, imparted expressions of hope, apportioned knowledge and insight, and shared understanding when none of the aforementioned were possible.

Who I am as a person is intimately intertwined with my professional identity. It is an arduous task to separate the two. My role as a physician is a responsibility I cherish and yet its serpentine grasp now nearly squeezed the life out of me. In order to recover, repair, and reclaim, I needed to give myself permission to receive: to receive care, words, rest, and all that modern medicine embraces; a chance to reconnect my body, mind, and spirit; an opportunity to become whole again. At the time, it felt foreign, an abandonment of sorts.

But then I lay in that private alcove alone, reflecting on how powerless I really was. And in that cognizance, there is a sense of freedom. A freedom from the toil and slog.

A freedom from the expectations of being superhuman, even if those unconscious beliefs are unintentionally self-inflicted. A freedom from the mechanics and routine of life. In that sacred time and space, there was the freedom to feel and embrace feeling; to consider and comprehend, to sense and emot, to behold and bear witness, to suffer and heal, to breathe and abide in quiet stillness, to be grateful for this unwelcome revitalizing experience.

When I return to work from my maternity leave, my days will be filled once again with the demands of the sick; after all, that is my calling. But this time when I return, the weight of that commitment will be tempered with the wisdom harvested during my spell of rest. What I have reaped, I will sow in golden seeds of words imparted to medical students starting out on this journey. To those youthful jewels sparkling with vigour and aspiration, I will share the discernment of experience and the importance of finding meaningful joy in the activities that consume our time. In the end, time for us all is finite. But the hope that we use our time well—that is infinite. 🍁

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