

Like father, like son

by David Ponka MD CM CCFP(EM) FCFP



My father and I were close, but our frameworks for understanding the world could not be further apart. He was a scientist, a specialist of hematopoietic cells and iron metabolism in the human body. I am a family doctor, with a special interest in global health. To me, context is everything. To him, context was just a confounder.

My dad passed away this week while attending a conference overseas. He was an inspiration to me in so many ways, including the rigour of his science. But whenever I explained what we were trying to do at the College's Besroux Centre for Global Family Medicine, he looked at me slightly perplexed. It didn't fit his neat, positivist framework in which an immutable reality could be discovered by looking through a microscope. Our world is much more a combination of the science of family medicine embedded in the real, messy world, and our microscope uses different filters and lenses depending on the situation.

All my father would talk about were his latest hematology experiments. Amazingly, hematology was probably my weakest subject in medical school because it brought back pangs of dread around interminable discussions and quizzes on the role of heme synthesis and erythrocyte precursors and those hematopoietic cells. But you had to admire my dad's drive and passion.

He also loved travel and adventure, and tried to impart that to me. He fled an oppressive regime in the former Czechoslovakia in 1979 with his young family, thinking the situation would never normalize in his lifetime. When we made it to Canada, all we could do was enjoy our new freedom and travel. My first memory is crossing the iron curtain and the sound of police dogs searching around our car. My second memory is driving from Montreal to New York City while sleeping on the back bench (red leather) of a 1972 Pontiac.

Now that I think of it, he didn't talk that much about work while on the road, he was focused on absorbing the new sights and sounds of his surroundings-it's almost as though he has a persona for discovering small things-precise and systematic-and a different persona for exploring the world around him. In those times, he was gregarious, generous and uprooted.

It's not unlike a typical day you and I spend at the office. Lab review is by needs quiet and careful. But then we move on to our next patient and have to make a human connection, often using narrative and humour, and adjusting based on the context. It's really terrific work and when he died, I wished we had understood our respective worlds better.

I just pulled out my father's last paper, that he hadn't shared with me yet. In it, he describes how his beloved hematopoietic cells may in fact be behaving differently depending on their stage of development. He was amazed that hematopoietic cells may actually be a little bit poetic.

I am glad that we can still learn from one another.

Dr. Prem Ponka MD PhD passed away on November 3, 2019

