

Stop Your Hemorrhage; Start to Wiggle!

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"Saving someone's life is like falling in love. The best drug in the world. For days, sometimes weeks afterwards, you walk the streets, making infinite whatever you see. Once, for a few weeks, I couldn't feel the earth -- everything I touched became lighter. Horns played in my shoes. Flowers fell from my pockets."

–Frank Pierce, from the movie, Bringing out the Dead

Do you remember the feeling? Floating twenty-three feet above the ground after your first procedure, your first “save”? Likely you were in your healthcare training. Remember in your early medical student days, when your unblemished white coat still sported those just-been-unfolded creases, how thrilled you were with every opportunity to interact with a patient, any patient?

Do you feel like that about your healthcare career now?

There are many reasons for your ‘thrill-o-penia’. You might have had one too many angry patients or one too many night shifts. One too many interrupted family moments. Another cost-cutting move by your hospital. Another regulation foisted upon you by the insurance industry or the government. A lawsuit. A bad clinical environment. Anything.

There is an old medical saying: all bleeding stops eventually. Either we heal or we die. In this context, death implies continuing on the same path -- disliking our career, practices, colleagues, and patients -- or quitting and walking away from all we have built. Or, we can choose to heal.

Many health care professionals now have concerns, even doubts, about our profession and our place in it. Sometimes, it's easy to feel we have lost our way. We lose track of what brought us here. I recently contemplated the reason I chose my medical specialty.

Milton felt like my thirty-seventh admission that January night on call for Internal Medicine; a drunk, vomiting blood. I smelled him before I saw him, a mixture of distillery and slaughterhouse. The ICU room lights were off, and in the greenish light of the monitors, he glowed with an unearthly hue. There was more blood on him than in him. He was very successfully attempting to bleed to death.

The room lights flashed on, temporarily blinding us. The GI fellow on call rattled in behind the endoscopy cart, briefly and efficiently examined Milton, and started in on his routine endoscopic ‘poke and choke’.

I'd never seen anything like it before. Arching vermilion rainbows of blood splashing against a salmon pink mucosal sky. Undulating plump varices wending their way to the patient's very soul. The musty smell of the melena, the crisp draw of the suction. It was amazing. And so beautiful. Really.

The fellow quickly found the bleeding vessel, efficiently stopped the hemorrhage, pulled out the scope, and trundled off to bed. The fellow had done a routine procedure, Milt'd had his life restored, and I'd experienced a direct download from God.

After thirty-six hours on call, I finally made it home, and immediately rushed to phone my parents. I rhapsodized to my mother about the smells, the sounds, the blood, the save. My mom's only question when I petered out was ... "Did it make your ears wiggle?"

Does it make your ears wiggle?

That might sound strange to you, but in my family, we understand. To my mother, if your ears wiggle you are in your own unique place in the universe... your spot, your bliss. She was a realtor at the time, and wouldn't sell you a house if you couldn't honestly say that your ears wiggled as you walked up the front walk.

Gastroenterology and medicine did, and still do, make my ears wiggle today. The procedures, the interactions with the patients, the opportunity to educate. The beauty and peristaltic dance of the magnificent gastrointestinal tract

How about you? What about health care made your ears wiggle?

So now it's your chance. It's time to tell your own story. Take a moment to think back beyond all the cranky patients, the tired partners, and the stressed staff. Do not think about where you are, only where you were when this was all new, back at the dawn of your career.

Get out a pad of paper and a pen. Sit and think about these questions for five minutes before beginning. Answer each fully, as at least a brief essay, before moving on to the next.

Ready to start? Okay, let's take a trip down memory lane.

What made you decide on a career in medicine? Recount the moment of your decision. How did you decide what specialty of health care you would enter? What 'made your ears wiggle' about it?

What excited you once you were in our profession? What aspect of medicine brought you the greatest happiness?

Good work. Look over your answers, from the point of view of the here-and-now. Do they still apply? Can you find that love for your profession again? Or has healthcare become something you can no longer identify with?

Consider what you do verses what you said you loved. Maybe you can get yourself back into the part of the profession you enjoy. It could be as simple as shifting your duties and minimizing the part that doesn't make you happy, to something as sweeping as changing careers to embrace the aspect of medicine for which you used to feel passion.

We can't provide answers, not to everyone. But we can illuminate possibilities.

Let's make your ears wiggle again.

Virginia Beach gastroenterologist, Patricia L. Raymond M.D. FACP is an author and consultant, who speaks to nurses and physicians through hospital systems and medical conventions. With her company Rx For Sanity™, she humorously leads physicians and nurses to rediscover their joy in medicine and to learn to first "Turn Care Inward". Her book, "Don't Jettison Medicine: Resuscitate Your Passion For The Career You Loved!" is available now. Visit www.RxForSanity.com soon for complimentary information and links to better care for yourself and for your staff, and to subscribe to our FREE monthly newsletter, Rx For Sanity™ eNews, with medical humor and simple tips to enhance your life in Medicine.
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