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THE
Richard Spear, M.D.
 MEMORIAL
 ESSAY
 CONTEST

The Price of Passion



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There were too many enticing opportunities in life to seriously consider locking myself up into one career path, or so I thought at the ripe old age of 15. At that age my dreams could be described as

grandiose visions of jet-setting around the world as an airline pilot or possibly becoming the next James Herriot in the veterinary field. In my idealistic mind, the solutions to most of life's problems were black and white. But reality had a way of bringing me back down to earth with the practical likelihood that I would follow in the footsteps of my father and grandfather into the field of human medicine. The most pressing argument that I can recall went something like this: "Why would you want to learn about and be proficient in the care of so many different animals when you could focus on just one creature, man, with his incredible mind and capacity to reason?" Somehow, in a twisted sort of way, it made sense.

It was during these turbulent teenage years that I met an incredible young woman who would change my mind forever. I was drawn to her from our first encounter in Sunday school class. She was taller than all the other girls with long blonde disheveled hair. She exuded confidence and intelligence to such a degree that it made me wonder why she even chose to associate with us mere mortals in that mundane class. Maybe she didn't have a choice. Her imperfections were actually what made her most endearing, most notably that warm but crooked smile. She also had peculiarly long fingers that might have been described in some medical textbooks as arachn-

odactly. Those fingers were the instruments whence sprung her greatest talent, playing the piano. This gift could only be described as sheer genius. When she sat before the ivories, she became a woman possessed with the spirits of great maestros from ages past such as Mozart, Liszt and Rachmaninoff. Her spidery fingers would weave a tapestry of sheer magic, unleashing sounds that could only resonate from the heavens. One evening, she invited me to sit beside her as she played her piano. She chose to perform for me a piece that I could not remember hearing before, Pachelbel's "Canon in D Major." Sitting beside her, I felt her intense passion radiating up my spine and producing goose bumps in a wave that left my whole body tingling. She took me on a magical journey that culminated in an outburst of emotion; a waterfall of tears tumbling down my cheeks. In those fleeting moments, she exposed a small part of her incredibly complex mind to me and in the process deeply touched my soul. I had witnessed real passion.

We became very close friends and I shared with her my confusion over choosing the correct life path. She was a patient listener, soothing me with her music and reminding me that the most important thing was to tap into my inner passion for whatever career I chose. Unfortunately, our paths diverged as she decided to pursue her musical talents at one of the finest schools in this country while I remained close to home struggling to be a research scientist.

When still in college, the alluring sirens of my past gently coaxed me back to what, in my mind, was my presumed calling, medicine. However, I needed confirmation that I could deal with the "craziness" of real people as opposed to lab rats and amoeba. I therefore started working as an orderly at a local hospital.

As an orderly, my duties consisted of assisting the predominantly female nurses in their daily tasks, catheterizing male patients and working on the psychiatry ward. The latter task was assigned to males mainly as a result of the sexist belief that a male would be more capable than a female of restraining an unruly mental patient. If you seriously looked at this skinny geek, you might have disagreed. It was during one of those psychiatry ward stints that I finally tapped into my own passion for my career path.

One evening on the locked portion of the psychiatry ward, I was as usual making beds and refilling water pitchers. I came to the locked room of a patient in restraints. I had been told during nurses' report that this young woman had been diagnosed with catatonic schizophrenia. She was found on the street naked and bruised with evidence that she was attempting to enucleate her eyeballs. The woman was disheveled with matted blonde hair. She was curled up in a fetal position as much as the restraints allowed. She was hardly recognizable. It was only when I looked at the name on her chart that reality hit me like a lightning bolt. Here was my beautiful muse, the young woman who had touched my soul with her strokes on the

piano. One of the most passionate and beautiful minds I'd known was locked in, close to death in that room – presumably, because her mind had turned upon itself. Time stopped for an eternity as the realization of this tragedy sunk in, and I wept. I was saddened and horrified at the waste of such an incredible mind. The selfish part of me also felt the loss of maybe never experiencing her passion again. I sensed in her pale blue eyes a desperate pleading for help to escape the maze her mind had trapped her in. In a rare lucid moment, I could hear her tell me to tap into my inner passions and become the doctor that I was destined to become. The final obstacles of fear and uncertainty were hurdled, and the course of my life was charted onto the field of medicine.

It was many years later that I saw a movie titled "A Beautiful Mind," which portrayed the struggle of a highly intelligent man to identify the boundaries of what we define as reality. My reality, at one moment in time, was that I was told by a schizophrenic woman to find my deepest purpose in life in the field of medicine. An incredibly intelligent person, she had shown me the power of the mind to create as well as to destroy. She taught me that there is a price for passion. In the wake of incredible power and beauty there can be immense destruction, as with a herd of wild horses. There are still many distractions in my life but when I think back about my muse, the passion burns as bright as it did the first time I met her. I dedicate this essay and my career to her. **LM**

Note: Dr. John has his ophthalmology practice in the Springs Medical Center and is an assistant clinical professor at the University of Louisville School of Medicine, Department of Ophthalmology.

Louisville Medicine Editor Mary G. Barry, MD, presents Dr. John with his award at the President's Soiree.

