



BLEACH WIPES AND MIXED VEGETABLES: RECOGNIZING “BEAUTY BY MISTAKE” DURING PANDEMIC TIMES

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“Dr. McGee, you always seem so happy. What’s your secret?” muses a nurse on one of the nursing units. Many people think my frequent smiling means I am happy and have it all

together, all the time. I do enjoy my job as a hospitalist and medical educator and do indeed smile a lot, but there are many days beneath that smile when anxiety, frustration, anger and a myriad of other emotions fight for my attention. Like most health care workers, I have been experiencing the mental and emotional burden of this coronavirus pandemic. As an internist and type A personality, I go around imagining worst-case scenarios in their grimmest reality. I worry about my patients, my colleagues on the frontlines and my family, especially my parents. I worry about the old stooped-over man at the grocery store, defenseless against this nasty virus. I worry about people who suffer from psychiatric disorders, substance use disorders and social isolation. The uncertainty surrounding this disease is relentlessly unsettling.

As I was walking my dog Drew one night, worries about the coronavirus pandemic swirled in my never-quiet mind. My music playlist was on shuffle—I was just trying to distract myself. The incredibly catchy song *Pocketful of Sunshine* by Natasha Bedingfield started playing and jolted me into a new awareness. I was haunted by the chorus’ wistful lyrics: “Take me away (take me away), To better days (to better days), Take me away (Take me away), A hiding place (a hiding place)...” I wanted to escape the madness: hop on a plane to somewhere beautiful (and unpopulated), or travel back to a safer time. My rational brain kicked itself back into gear and reminded me that 1. There is no such place and 2. That would be

selfish. This is life. I am trained to respond to crises like this. I am made for this. There is still so much beauty to experience in life, even through its ugliness.

I started really noticing the beauty of the flowering trees and the dusky sky. I savored the smell of burning firewood in the pleasant, damp, cool air. Almost every person who walked or drove past me and my handsome sidekick dog (dressed in a dapper sweater, of course) smiled, said hello or waved. I felt a kinship with total strangers that I have never felt before. Something had changed, and it was not just my mindset. Even in the early days of this pandemic, many people were becoming more interconnected than ever before. It was beautiful.

In the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, author Milan Kundera discusses the concept of “beauty by mistake.” In the context of the “beauty” of New York, he remarks, “It’s unintentional. It arose independent of human design, like a stalagmitic cavern. Forms which are in themselves quite ugly turn up fortuitously, without design, in such incredible surroundings that they sparkle with a sudden wondrous poetry. Unintentional beauty. Yes. Another way of putting it might be “beauty by mistake.” This COVID-19 pandemic is ugly and awful, and it will get worse. But, from uncertainty, fear and suffering also comes beauty and goodness. I encourage you to look for the unintentional beauty that springs forth from this pandemic. It is there, if you are looking for it.

As Fr. Gregory Boyle puts it in his book *Tattoos on the Heart*, “Mother Teresa diagnosed the world’s ills in this way: we’ve just ‘forgotten that we belong to each other.’ Kinship is what happens to us when we refuse to let that happen.” I see so many people recognize their kinship with one another. I saw kinship when a man

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at the grocery store winked at me and whispered under his breath, “Hey, there are a couple bags of frozen mixed veggies left under that shelf down there.” I saw kinship when a case manager bought me bleach wipes when I posted that I couldn’t find cleaning supplies. I see kinship when people acknowledge strangers on the street, and when enormous numbers of crafters offer to make masks for health care workers. I see kinship when a co-worker offers a listening ear, and when people post rainbow pictures and encouraging signs. I see kinship when medical students volunteer their services to physicians to babysit, run errands and deliver food. I see kinship when colleagues of all disciplines interact with and support each other more than they ever did before.

There are no surefire strategies to navigate the stress and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am trying to eat healthfully, pray, meditate, exercise, read, keep in contact with loved ones and enjoy nature. But all of these are not enough: we need the type of resilience that Gregory Boyle speaks of in *Tattoos on the Heart*. “Sometimes resilience arrives in the moment you discover your own unshakeable goodness.” We must believe in our own souls, and try to recognize and join with our colleagues’ souls—we are all fighting together to save our community.

Remember that you are trained to do your job. You are a professional. You know what to do, how to figure out what to do, or whom to ask for help. You absolutely have permission to feel anxious, frustrated or terrified. Feel it, scream or not scream, breathe through

it. Then, be intentional about channeling those energies into leading others. Now is the time to step up and set the example that being strong also means being vulnerable, and realizing it. Acknowledge your worries, ask for help during challenging times, check on all your staff and ask how they are faring.

In closing, I would like you to participate in a brief mental exercise with me. When things get overwhelming, imagine yourself as a tree in a storm. The wind and rain are harsh. Imagine that during this storm, your branches will bend, but they will never break. The trunk (your core) will never waver. This tree represents all of you during these challenging times, my dear physician colleagues. We’ve got this. Besides opening your hearts to your patients, open your hearts to your fellow physicians, coworkers, family, pets, therapist, friends and anyone who can support you through this. Let others care for you as you care for your patients during this pandemic. Admitting that you cannot do everything is a sign of strength. Take care of yourselves and each other. Be the “bridge over troubled water” for your patients and colleagues. Remember that others can provide that bridge for you in return. There is no shame in resting on your friend’s bridge if you need it.

(Editor’s note: And...wash your hands. -MB) 

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