Galileo’s Grapes

Recognizing Those Who Helped Make Us Who We Are

The sun, with all those planets revolving around it . . . can still ripen a bunch of grapes as if it had nothing else in the universe to do.

Galileo Galilei

NOT ONE GIVEN TO VISIONS, I STILL FEEL AS IF I ACTUALLY SAW THEM, THERE ON THE DECK AS I SWAM AT THE old Fitzsimons Army Hospital pool in Colorado. They were young men, their bodies pale, translucent, and incomplete. Each had part of an arm or a leg missing or had some other wound inconsistent with the perfection of the rest of the body. They were World War II GIs recuperating in the 1940s from battle injuries, as so many veterans at Fitzsimons had before the base was recently decommissioned. Most of them sat on a long wooden bench, silently gazing at the water’s reflection. A few moved clumsily for short distances along the deck, some embarrassed by their awkwardness, others visibly frustrated. As I swam I wondered what it had been like for them to be there and what had happened to them after they left. I felt very sorry about what had happened to them in war and deeply grateful for what happened to them after they left. I felt very sorry about what

Having seen WW II veterans as patients virtually every day of my career, I began reflecting more deeply about them only a few years ago. The “vision” at the pool reminded me of my gratitude toward them and has made me think more about gratitude in general. One of the benefits of having had a long career is there being much to look back on. A disadvantage is that so much has happened, a lot is forgotten. I know, however, that for all of the individual effort required over 3 decades of training and practice, I did not get to this point on my own. I have benefited from the mostly caring and supportive environment intrinsic to medicine. As opposed to some other professions that are inherently competitive or even adversarial, medicine is collaborative and strongly net positive rather than zero sum. While it would be an overstatement to say that every coworker we see during the workday is motivated primarily by altruism, I have been struck in noting that, effectively, the work each person does is for the benefit of someone else. Ultimately, we show up to help patients, their loved ones, and each other. Like Galileo’s grapes, the medical family inhabits a grand system that is essentially sustaining and nurturing.

Thinking about things like gratitude takes quiet time, something we have less of these days. Even the inclination to ponder such things is reduced with the contraction of physicians’ interests in the past decade from the effect of practice constraints imposed on us. Having experienced these

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too, that their personal effort is the only thing that exceeds
the help they get along the way and that without ample
amounts of both they would not succeed. Adding to the
knowledge of their transformation an understanding of what
physicians in practice go through has persuaded me that no
matter what specific direction it takes, the course of a med-
cal life is nothing short of astonishing—a rich example of
those Ernest Hemingway described as living life “full up.”
Remarkable for me too is gratitude for physicians of times
past, whose factual knowledge and therapeutic tools may
have been comparatively limited but whose dedication and
perseverance were not. I recall outstanding teachers, role
models, and fellow house officers I had who in those for-
mative years affirmed an inexperienced and often unconfi-
dent young physician. Later came talented practice part-
ners whose commitment to patients and each other only
deepened as medical practice devolved over the years. I am
grateful to medical researchers and those who fund them
for providing treatments that are common now but that could
only be wished for earlier in my career. Throughout I have
benefited from a loving family, affirming patients and staffs,
and, everywhere I have worked, nurses whose devotion to
those in their care has been nothing short of inspirational.
I have been greatly heartened, too, by the work of those who
create or present music, art, and literature.
How about you? Who or what has inspired you? Given
you confidence? Sustained you? Treated you with respect
no matter what category you occupied at the time? Reas-
ured you? Been loyal? Given you hope? Been gentle with
you? Been hard on you when necessary? Made you laugh?
Stayed? Such questions and their answers are completely
individual, of course, but without some experience refer-
able to them you would not be where you are.
Much of what is wondrous in medicine is communal. We
are grateful for the presence of others who share our diffi-
cult journey. Even in this supportive environment, though,
in matters of patient care the physician decides and acts
alone—and lives alone with the results of those decisions.
It is this aspect of medicine that delineates reputation from
character. Reputation comes from things we do that others
know about. Character emanates mostly from actions taken
when no one else is looking. My experience convinces me
that the great majority of physicians value character far above
reputation. They also know the cost of possessing it, a cost
not even those closest to us can truly comprehend. Under-
standing the solitary price paid, perhaps what a physician
should be most grateful for is the individual self—for being
what physicians are: intrepid, faithful, compassionate, un-
compromising in matters of patient care.
If you can be totally candid for a moment and contem-
plate the following quote without pretense or false humil-
ity, you may recognize someone you know. Written to de-
scribe the face of The Dying Gaul, it could as well have been
written about healers throughout time, and no less in ours:
What we can rely on are the comeliness and iron virtue of the short-
lived hero: his loyalty to cause and comrades, his bravery in the
face of overwhelming odds, the gargantuan generosity with which
he scatters his possessions and his person and with which he spills
his blood.6
This likely describes you. If so, like the soldiers on the
pool deck you have paid a great price to do a great good and
have helped more than you can know. Please accept my ad-
miration and gratitude. Knowing that you are along on the
journey feels like the warmth of the sun.

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