The Absence of Something

Having lost interest in the grand rounds lecture being given, I began to glance around the large hall. Patches of sunshine set certain things alight, one of which was a colleague’s left hand resting on the table in front of him. My gaze fixed on that image because there was something unnatural in its look, not from a deformity of his hand but from the absence of something—the gold wedding ring I had seen him wear for decades. I had been thinking about him as the first anniversary of his wife’s death approached. I wondered how he was doing, when he had removed the ring, and why surviving spouses do.

The act of removing a wedding ring in such a circumstance must be a declaration of some kind. Is a ring’s removal a statement to the self (“I no longer feel married”) or a statement to the beloved lost (“I will always treasure you, but I must let go”? Intended or not, such an act is a message to the world: “I am no longer married.” And, at least for some, “I am no longer married and I am available.” A wedding ring’s removal could be a sign that the sight or feel of it was too painful a reminder of the presence that was and the absence that is. Glancing at my friend’s hand once more, I wondered what the future holds for him. I wondered, too, what absences the future might hold for me, or for those I love.

Our family knows absence. My wife and I abide one of the most devastating kinds of absence, that caused by the death of a child. Our son, Zachary, was killed in a plane crash at 7 AM on January 15, 2009.1,2 Our family feels his loss most painfully on that date, easily the worst day of the year for us. Every January 15 my wife and I rise early and sit in our living room in darkness except for the glow of a gentle fire. At 6:30 we light a candle and track the course of the 30-minute flight across Colorado that took Zach’s life, and mark in deep sorrow the moment we lost him.

Then, through tears, with halting speech, we read out loud John O’Donohue’s poem, “On the Death of the Beloved,” which lovingly describes Zach in each stanza—as it does others’ beloveds lost.3 The poem’s final stanza implies hope for the future and offers an inspirational way to live on in the presence of encumbering sorrow. We then share stories about Zach, which lessens our sadness and allows us to eventually move to expressions of gratitude for the joy and wonder his presence brought for the 32 years we had him. The ritual bonds the two of us ever more deeply and evokes a sense of immense gratitude in each that we are not alone in the sorrow and joy of living on.

The most poignant memory for me of a shared story of absence after Zach’s death was one wholly unexpected. I had driven to an automobile garage in our neighborhood to get the title out of Zach’s car so we could transfer ownership to his brother. As I left my car and walked toward the garage, I saw Zach’s car in the work area. Instead of going through the office door I went directly into the work area, opened the glove compartment, took the title out—and then noticed that I had been under the stare of a mechanic standing several yards away. I concluded from his persistent look that I was not supposed to be in that area and walked quickly to my car.

As I looked up after starting the engine, I was startled to see the mechanic standing outside my window. I opened the window, expecting to be chastised. Instead, he softly said, “I’m sorry about your son.” I’m sorry about your son: tender words of sympathy from a total stranger. I got out of the car to thank him and could tell that he was shy, which added even more to his expression of sympathy. Repetitively stroking the work rag he was holding, he then solemnly shared the loss of his 8-year-old son years before, who did not survive complex congenital heart disease surgery. He was genuinely sad about the death of my son, and when he saw me he brought to the surface the underlying sorrow he carries for the loss of his own.

I later thought, This man is somebody’s patient. I wonder if his doctor knows the emotional burden he carries. That thought affirmed my practice of taking a social history at every patient’s first visit, and the importance of knowing who patients are as well as what malady they may have.

Of the many burdens a patient or physician may carry, the death of a beloved is among the worst, but I have learned that there are other kinds of absences...
individuals may feel similarly. A young friend wrote to tell me after Zach’s death that her grief, which began abruptly when her husband announced he no longer wanted to be a husband and father and walked away, was not unlike our grief. She too lost her beloved—totally, unexpectedly, and in an instant. Pondering the similarity of my young friend’s sudden loss to ours, I can imagine the opposite—a long prelude to a devastating divorce being akin to the slow, sorrowful leaving of a loved one dying of cancer or a terminal neuromuscular illness. The same could be true of “losing” a loved one still physically present whose personhood has been taken away by dementia or a stroke.

In caring for others we physicians deal with absences, or the threat of them, routinely. Although we are not and should not be paralyzed by the fact, even the most common ailments carry a potentially serious threat to a patient’s well-being or survival. Some diagnoses we make are seriously threatening to patients and demand extreme treatments from us to prevent disability or death. Others toll the bell for impending, ultimate absence the instant the diagnosis is shared with the patient—and thus direct our care to patient issues beyond the biomedical as well as to the biomedical.

Aging patients often share with physicians troubling limitations from degeneration in mobility, cognition, hearing, sight—ultimately fearing the total loss of any of these. Patients and friends with hearing impairment have told me they feel excluded from a conversation, and thus isolated from those they are with, if they miss even a few words of what is said and thus cannot understand a statement made. Many such people have soberly shared that they miss the enjoyment of music they have treasured all their lives, and no longer attend concerts or even play music in their homes. Several patients have said that impairment of their vision has affected them more personally than chronic pain or other symptoms, having taken away their lifelong joy of reading books, or seeing clearly the faces of people they are with. Women who have had a breast or uterus removed have expressed profound grief especially over the symbolic losses such procedures bring.

In the midst of all we hear from patients, colleagues, friends, or strangers regarding their health concerns or experiences of loss, the fact that they trust us with their personal stories is a gratifying affirmation that we are being of service to them—and exemplifies one definition of the essence of medicine: All day long, and on many nights, we bless others as the work blesses us.

The most vivid image I have of my friend whose wife died a year ago is not that of seeing his left hand absent his wedding ring. The most vivid image is something I saw at her wake: the vision of his head resting softly on the chest of his older brother, whose arm cradled him as they stood together near her open casket. Courageously allowing us to see his vulnerability, my friend gave those present a great gift. The scene told everything anybody who doesn’t already know could ever know about the pain of deep, personal absence.

Last night, as I was reading to my 3-year-old granddaughter before putting her in the crib—her head resting softly on my chest—she raised her head, gave me a kiss on the cheek, and then laid her head down again. Several weeks ago in the same setting, as I stood over her crib just before her eyes closed she looked up at me and said, "Will you be here when I wake up?" Will you be here when I wake up. I want you to be here when I wake up. I want you to be with me. I love you, Grandpa.

I want to be with her, and with all whom I hold dear, including my patients. Intensely aware of the devastating feeling absence can cause—but also of the richness of presence—I will do all I can to delay the absence of something in their lives being the absence of me.

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