

2019

Answering the Call

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Recommended Citation

Hodapp, Joseph (2019) "Answering the Call," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.

Available at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol4/iss1/18

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Answering the Call

Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to the Moving Pens writing group at the Medical College of Wisconsin, who helped me to capture and craft this story, and to my father, for whom this piece is written.

Answering the Call

"As far as we know, Dad is fine," she starts, but her words are cut short by a sob.

My heart takes flight in my chest, threatening to flutter up into my throat. My sister rarely cries, and only for good reason. I hold my breath and she continues.

"He noticed the right side of his face drooping this morning. We called the hospital and the nurse told us to call 911. Dad was annoyed, it seemed over the top. You know how he can get. Mom's with him in the ambulance. They are about to leave."

One week into medical school and my mind is already a blur with information. Sitting in my dingy study room, pouring through textbooks and lecture notes, my sister's words silence my racing thoughts like a thunderclap. But only for a moment. *Dad? What? How? But I just saw him the other week, healthy as an ox – this must be a mistake. He's a rower, for god's sake.* In a moment, the several hundred miles from my medical school to my home seem to stretch before me, an impassable chasm. I steady my breathing, and open my mouth to speak, still unsure of what will come out.

"Did Dad seem to have any other neurological deficits?" I ask, careful to keep my emotions in check. My tongue feels weird trying out *neurological* for the first time. Almost like experiencing an exotic taste I haven't tried enough yet to fully appreciate. "Did he have any trouble moving his arms or walking around?" My heart is still pounding, and a part of me wants to laugh at my pitiful attempt to glean more information.

"No. I made him raise his arms for me, and he didn't complain about numbness or pain. Just drooping." My sister is a savvy social worker. Parsing through a medical problem isn't entirely new to her.

"Good," I hear myself say. "Text me more information when you get it. Or call. Take care of yourself. Love you."

The phone clicks and I'm alone in my study room again. The silence of that little room presses hard against me, clearing room for self-doubt to creep in.

Like trying to take a sip from a fire hydrant. That's how my anatomy professor described medical school on the first day, and I think it's a fair estimation. With the tiny bit I have managed to digest in my first week, I know what little I can offer my sister right now will be woefully inadequate. A part of me wonders if I will ever be prepared to handle a situation like this.

Amidst my books, I am struck by how alone I suddenly feel. Only, this loneliness isn't the isolating pressure of rigorous professional training. No – in comparison, getting blasted by the hydrant of medical education is a breeze. This is the loneliness of confronting mortality. I attempt to compartmentalize my feelings. There is no time to be ruled by fear in an emergency. *But this is my Dad, dammit, not some classic case report in one of my textbooks with a multiple-choice answer.* My straining hold on control buckles for a moment, letting uncertainties and concerns take root and dig deep, deep, deep. My phone is horribly, sickeningly silent on the desk in front of me.

This man – my father – is not going to be around forever.

I know that. But it is one thing to KNOW it, and another thing entirely to look Death in the eye and think: *I can't do a damn thing to stop you.* I spent eighteen years of my life in my Dad's household, being taught to respect, to love, to care, to cherish, to wonder. He showed me that being a good man has nothing to do with size, strength, and power – except when it comes to the heart, love, and will.

Now, I am confronted with a terrible possibility: *I may not have the chance to learn more from him. All our future conversations about love, women, philosophy, and faith might never happen. The beautiful things that occur in his mind may never be shared with me again.*

Fear is a dangerous thing... Gathering my thoughts, I force them aside and stoically work with the facts. *What do I know? Where is Dad now?* My phone buzzes.

Text: Vitals are good. Getting a CT scan soon. Talking with neurologist after.

I sit down at my tablet to look up "facial drooping" and its associated diseases. I must admit, I feel a little traitorous gathering information over Google. I know that as a first-year student, hot off the presses, I am not supposed to know any better. Becoming a good doctor takes time – a *long* time. However, there is something about the heft of that polyester, pearled white coat draped across my shoulders like some hero's cape that makes the gap between my knowledge and my professional responsibility feel terribly deep and wide. After perusing Mayo Clinic's website, I find the top two usual suspects: Bell's Palsy and ischemic stroke. The first is not life or brain threatening. The other is very much so. As I read up on how to know the difference between the two, I get another text message from my sister.

Text: Bell's Palsy. Good news.

Reading over my shoulder, Death turns softly and retreats. I know my alabaster hero's cape had nothing to do with his leaving. And I know it is only a matter of time before his return. For a moment, I allow my bated breath to escape as uncertainty and concern fade away.

My Dad will stay with us after all. At least for another day. And the grave responsibility of my chosen profession, that remains too. Maybe someday I will grow into this coat. Perhaps I am wrong that it is a cape only for heroes.

I close my books, momentarily forgotten on the table. My bag fills quickly with the burden of knowledge yet to be gained. Leaving the small study room behind, I adjust the pack on my shoulder and set off. I will get there. One day at a time.