

July More Voices: Speaking Up

Category: Speaking Up

written by Paul Gross | July 1, 2020

Dear *Pulse* readers,

The July *More Voices* theme is Speaking Up.

I think most of us would like to be the one who speaks up to right a wrong or to call out an injustice.

I've done that on occasion, but I can remember other times when I've remained silent.

Here's a time when I spoke up:

I was a student at an all-male college that was in the process of becoming co-ed. In order for that to happen, some dormitories would need to begin housing female students. One winter day I returned to my dorm to find a crowd gathered outside and the dorm itself completely covered with banners calling for women "co-hogs" to "keep out." I was stunned—and offended. And I didn't want lend assent to this display by remaining silent.

What to do?

After climbing the stairs to my room, I made a sign: a female symbol—the circle with a plus sign—and in the circle I drew a fist. I placed the sign in my window, which happened to face the front of the dorm.

It didn't take long to get a reaction. My window was pelted with snowballs. When I went back downstairs and tried to engage the other side in conversation, I was called the f-word (a slur for someone who is gay) by a large, menacing dorm-mate. He kept it up for the rest of the school year.

In that instance, speaking out felt righteous and bracing. Also scary. And lonely.

Here's a time I did not speak up: I was one of several third-year medical students on an orthopedics clerkship, observing a resident manipulating the leg of an anguished Spanish-speaking woman. Every time he yanked or twisted, her mouth contorted in pain and she let out a cry of "Aiy!" In a mocking tone, the resident began to sing *Cielito Lindo*, the well-known Mexican song whose chorus begins "Ay, ay, ay-ay, canta y no llores."

My father was Cuban. That woman could have been my aunt. She was suffering. My fellow medical students and I watched this display of cruelty in silence. They said nothing. *I* said nothing.

Another time: I was now a full-fledged family doctor—a teacher of family medicine—and needed a new doctor for myself. A colleague recommended someone to me. This was not long after my wife had visited a new doctor herself and

been subjected to tests that were done, I was sure, simply to generate revenue. My poor wife had to endure my ranting about the inappropriateness of their doing an EKG on a healthy woman without high blood pressure or any other risk factor for heart disease.

And now, as I was waiting to see my new doctor, I was directed to a room and told to puff into a machine. They wanted to measure my breathing capacity. But why? I don't have asthma. I wasn't having any respiratory symptoms. The doctor hadn't even laid eyes on me yet. There was no reason to do this test, other than greed. I knew that. And yet, I blew into the machine—and said nothing.

In that moment, I'd accepted the role of a patient, someone who goes along with office protocol—partly to take the path of least resistance, partly out of curiosity—just as I'd accepted the role of the deferential medical student years before.

I'm guessing that many of you, like me, are capable of the bold gesture, and also capable of acquiescence.

I confess that I sometimes admire the exasperating hospitalized patient who brings an entire medical team to a screeching halt by refusing the CT scan or the MRI for no reason other than, "I don't feel like it."

And what about you? Have you had moments where you've spoken up in a medical setting—to a doctor, to a superior, or to a difficult patient? Or in a non-medical setting to combat racism or other forms of prejudice?

Or was there a time when you wished you had?

Visit the [More Voices FAQs](#) and then submit a piece of your lived experience to us. Remember, it should be 40-400 words. And no poetry, please.

Warmly,

Paul Gross
Editor