

Chapters in a Life Story

Category: Endings and Beginnings

written by Joseph Fennelly | December 10, 2020

My patient, Mary Kay, was a take-charge person. Even after a surgical error left her legs completely paralyzed, at age 48, she adjusted well to living in a nursing home and was dynamic, intelligent, and dedicated to her family and friends. Some of her friends even enjoyed a weekly martini with her.

After her tragic medical experience, but before I assumed her care, Mary Kay's husband, unable to live without her, had taken his own life. Thereafter, with the best of intentions, her family withheld other unpleasant news from her, including hiding her granddaughter's chronic fluctuating illness. Mary Kay secretly became despondent and overdosed on her medication.

Thus one chapter in our shared story ended and a new one began—one in which we had to heal our respective wounds. Hers by virtue of her loneliness and loss of meaning. Mine because I had to search deeper and attend more carefully to her narrative, which led to more trust and transparency.

This new beginning of my care for Mary Kay meant that no longer could I depend on my regular medical tool kit alone. I also had to resort to the contents of an old-fashioned black doctor's bag—to those attributes held within its aging leather sides, stretched to make room for imagination, deeper trust, enhanced dialogue, and, ultimately, shared healing.

Turning a page, I arranged for her to volunteer across the street at a local hospital, where she assumed a responsible task for many years. She also began to accompany me to other nursing homes, where we would lecture together about holistic care.

As our relationship progressed, there were continual ends and new beginnings. She became more dependent on our friendship, which required me to carefully reevaluate it and maintain a sensitive delineation between friendship and a professional relationship.

Once meaning returned to her life, Mary Kay thrived throughout her remaining years at the nursing home.

Ultimately, her family honored me by asking me to give her eulogy.

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