

Where Mortals Suffer Life

Category: Palliative and Hospice Care

written by John Michael Deblois | September 4, 2024

When she came, her legs were cold and her heart weak. The tracings showed flickering beats. She was confused and barely there. She was a ticking time bomb.

I talked to her husband of forty years, Jay, whose eyes carried the air of an elderly man with a walking cane. I was young, newly minted, and I was already guiding this family's journey: the long, treacherous way or the peaceful road to the inevitable. "Let's do everything we can," he said. We put a tube down her throat and attached it to a mechanical ventilator.

They stayed in the ICU for a month. When they got out, I noted his familiar, kindly face, the same steely resolve.

"Is it love," I asked, "that keeps him from letting go? Or is it stubbornness?" I inquired to my colleague.

"Maybe he doesn't really understand," she shrugged.

Her insight struck. His conviction could have that simple explanation. For Jay, doing everything was the only way. Death was knocking, and he didn't even know it.

I was exhausted and sleepless when we reintubated her. Yet, I felt I was the only one who recognized we needed more than another pill or a tube. When she finally coded, we pumped her chest, and blood came out of her mouth. She was seconds from eternity, and we were still inexplicably desperate to keep her in this painful world.

I went out and saw Jay. He asked me for the first time, "What do you think?" I tried not to fold at the gravity of the role pressed upon me at that moment: to stand by that terrible thing, a field of medicine hitherto unknown to me.

"Even if she survives, she might no longer wake." He looked at me, surprised.

I held his hand and looked him in the eye. "She'll be alright."

"Tama na," he said. *Stop.*

I whispered the time of death. Amid tears, Jay held on to me. His hands felt cool and wrinkled with age; his eyes pierced me with a final, sharp surveying look, and thanked me.

I walked to dark corner, a clueless boy swept by tears, stuffed with questions and internal resistance; guilty not of being unable to save a life, but of being unable to save it from ourselves.

It's not just Jay who didn't understand the situation. It's me.

And then I remembered those words: "to comfort always." Something we were taught in medical school: "To cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always."

I resolved to take a different path.

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