

Allowing Medicine to Break My Own Heart

Category: Scars

written by Hollis Roth | April 20, 2024

Growing up in a small town as a high achieving oldest daughter, my understanding of scars was purely physical. Skinned knees, a few stitches, and a small crescent moon on my right forearm were my sole casualties.

As I grew older, I began to understand that life can scar you invisibly, leaving hidden, yet fresh wounds, which can smart and burn when inadvertently hit.

Medical school taught me—a relatively unprepared mathematics major—about physiology, histology, pharmacodynamics and rigid clinical pathways. It did not, however, prepare me for the scars that practicing medicine would leave on my own heart.

As a palliative care physician, I often sit with patients during some of the worst moments of their lives. Some days the only thing I can provide is my presence, knowing that I cannot reverse the calamity which has crashed into their lives. Some days I reveal devastating diagnoses and disease progression. Some days I break and scar my own heart in the process.

My patients stay with me. I still remember the very first patient I cared for as a medical student, who died unexpectedly overnight. I remember being told to simply get over the immeasurable loss of human life—to toughen up—and vowing never to shield my heart from the loss and love and wonder of our daily practice. I remember the first patient I cared for in hospice, over a decade ago. I remember the first time I was able to ease someone's pain.

I remember the day death unexpectedly and violently arrived at my family's doorstep. I remember my training failing me that day.

These scars have marked me, and changed me. By not letting them harden my heart—instead allowing them to teach me to open it further—they have made me a better person and physician. Today they trace a story: while I am far from skinned knees and childhood stitches, I am right where I should be.

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