

Thanks to Frankie and Lucy

Category: Gratitude

written by Katharine Barnard | November 30, 2021

As anyone in health care knows, work has been difficult this past almost-two years. There are layers of dysfunction and disconnect. Despite our collective fatigue and overwhelm, however, we show up and do our best. We apologize for the system, the lapses in care, the way that everything feels complicated. This emotional work is heavy. Sometimes I have the image of myself, like Atlas supporting the globe, hunched forwards with my patients piled on my back. I am carrying them to higher ground.

In coping with adversity, we are encouraged to exercise, to meditate and to name the ways in which we are fortunate. While these practices may be helpful, they do not address the specific grief that I feel: I grieve the loss of connection.

As I drift, looking for solid ground, I have come to see that every day someone is placed in my path who reminds me why I do this work. Someone who, through revealing their humanity, connects me to my own.

Last week, I met Frankie, a great bear of a man who works nights staffing the psychiatric facility. He spoke of the prejudice he experiences from patients for his accented English, but in the next breath he conveyed great sympathy for their loneliness and a deep sense of faith in the value of his work.

Then there was Lucy, a displaced New Yorker, still actively grieving the death of her son to homicide back in 2016. She was a portrait in staid composure: downcast gaze, hands clasped, earth-toned cardigan and skirt, pearl brooch. When offered grief counseling, she looked me straight in the eye and said, "I'd rather just talk to God." But, if he ever became unavailable, she said she'd take that therapy referral. We both smiled.

There are patients who are wise and kind, patients whose growth brings me joy, and patients who make me belly-laugh. I want them to know how I appreciate their part in my day and how they have increased my capacity for generosity, empathy and humor. I have started to intentionally express gratitude to them, and doing so feels like a healing from our collective trauma. It is a way of lightening the burden. It is a way of putting into words what I have known for many years: that the essence of what we do is love.

*Katharine Barnard
Worcester, Massachusetts*