

Searching for Sparks

Category: Healing

written by Claire Unis | February 18, 2021

I've been thinking a lot about how the practice of medicine is not always the practice of wellness. How optimistically I applied to join this profession out of a sense that I intuitively took better care of myself than did many of my peers. I knew that happiness and health intertwined, though my naiveté about how to rescue one if the other faltered was sorely lacking.

Ahh, youth. Unencumbered by the kind of financial and emotional obligations I would eventually crave, back then I could restore balance with a day trip to wine country, or a chance to ski instead of study. I took up swing dancing during my surgery rotation in medical school, if only to prove to myself that my life was my own.

Years later I chose yoga, biking, traveling. Now, in the pandemic, yoga happens in my living room. I write about little moments. I hike. I daydream about the places I once went and hope to take my children someday.

But my pastimes are not my patients' pastimes. Often, dropping one activity suggestion after another, like feeding quarters into a slot, I hear them fall into the coin return instantly, never registering. Too many teens are hunched into themselves, short-circuiting into hopelessness. What they want is normal life – the one thing we cannot give them right now.

So I run diagnostics. What do you enjoy? What do you create? Who buoys you? I am no electrician – I go in seeking sparks. If I can find that little reservoir of power, maybe I can route their energy in a positive direction. Sometimes it works. Often it doesn't. They come back, and I try again. I remind them I am amateur at treating depression. They nod. We create a plan. They come back. Sometimes we try medication. Sometimes it even works. Often it does not, and they come back, and now I start to feel the weighty powerlessness that brought them here to begin with, but I remind myself of the most important piece of all: they came back.

I still feel like my pediatric practice has just begun, but I now have several patients who are children of former patients. There is no greater compliment than the trust this implies. Even after they had moved on, and become young adults, and didn't need my help for themselves, they came back.

When I feel, as we all do, the power suck that is this pandemic, it helps to remember that even if I cannot fix the problem, I can nudge people a little closer to emotional health by taking the pursuit of happiness seriously. Maybe we line up a series of pluses that eventually lead someplace. Maybe we have to reroute our expectations. Maybe life circumstances change and they just don't need me anymore. But the coming-back tells me they feel the warmth that's generated by trying.

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