

Stories

Category: Connections

written by Pamela Adelstein | December 13, 2022

For the fifteen years that I have been at my current job, I have held onto my patients' stories. Tucked into special pockets in my heart, they would be brought out whenever their "owner" came in for an appointment, where the story would take on a new form, then be stored away again. There were stories of shame and heartbreak, stories of joy and triumph. People confessed their deepest fears, shared events never revealed, and confided fledgling hopes and dreams. These stories are signs of patient-physician trust and of sacred human-to-human connections.

Now, after much soul-searching, I am leaving my health center to work elsewhere. As I've gradually packed my stuff—clearing out my desk, my shelves, my file cabinet—I've reveled in the spaciousness in my office. But in contrast to the lightness of my physical space, my physical body feels weighed down as I ponder my patients' stories.

What happens to these stories that I have carried for so long? Where should I place them as I prepare to make a new start and create space for future stories? Perhaps I release them with a bow of my head and a gentle exhalation?

When I precept residents, I teach them that all they need to do at each patient appointment is help the patient move a little closer to their health goals and give them some love. The connection is the medicine. With time, I have found it increasingly difficult to take care of patients without understanding who they are and what their story is. Two-dimensional diseases become three-dimensional people. People with depth and complexity. People who take a leap of faith each time they open up to a person whom they see only a few times a year, or even whom they've never met, as they seek healing and health.

My patients have made me a better person. They watched over me, noticing when I was tired or happy or overworked. They asked about my family, prayed for me, brought souvenirs from their travels, and made me crafts. They worried about me when I was absent. And when I shared the word of my departure, they shared their excitement for my new adventure.

And so, when I start my new job, as I open myself to personal growth, I will remember my former patients and their stories. I will send them messages of gratitude and my deepest wishes that they, too, are finding that which they seek.

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