

The Solace of Anger

Category: Coping

written by Molly Fessler | August 8, 2022

I first felt driven to pursue a medical education during my Peace Corps service in rural southern Belize. My work partner was the village's community health worker. Our duties varied and depended on the season, weather, and amount of laundry that needed washing that day—which we scrubbed at the river's edge with freshly picked soapberries. Sometimes we made oral rehydration salts for villagers with diarrhea. Or we visited the pregnant and the elderly. Or we made tortillas.

One day, we were called to visit a man who had recently returned from staying in northern Belize, where he'd sought treatment for pancreatic cancer. At that time, chemotherapy was unavailable in Belize. Families regularly held barbeque fundraisers to pay for their relatives to travel to Mexico for chemo. For most of my community, such an expense was out of reach. This villager had come home to die.

What stands out to me most from my time in that house was my anger. As this young man lay dying, rocking in a hammock over a stifling fire, he cried out often, in pain. His sclera were lemon yellow. His skin, stretched across his body, seemed painted on his bones.

I wanted to end his pain. Medicine, from a distance, seemed like a superpower. To fend off death with a stethoscope and a prescription pad—this seemed to me to be the ultimate tool for equalizing, for addressing the injustices I saw every day in Belize.

These days, many years later, the same frustration remains. I have a stethoscope now and soon will have prescription pad. But I still feel powerless. Racial inequities, the loss of abortion care, climate catastrophes, daily mass shootings, the violence of our discourse (and lack thereof)—are these fixable, solvable? The injustices I witnessed in Belize seem even starker at home, thrown into sharper relief in this supposed land of opportunity.

Perhaps it is a contradiction to say that my anger helps me cope. But it is true. The anger of my early 20s remains. It reminds me that I still care, that I'm still in this. There is a vision of the world I seek, beautiful enough to continue to work toward, to fight for. To cope, to continue to push forward, to have the bold and untethered imprudence to hope—that is a radical act in uncertain times.

So I continue. I still care, which is solace of its own.

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