

Waiting Rooms

Category: Watching the Clock

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My dad, an ob-gyn, hated to be late. If traveling, he insisted on arriving at airports hours early, in the days before TSA screenings necessitated it, resulting in long waits in boarding areas. I'd sigh and fidget in protest. Now, I've learned it's wise to allow time for the unexpected.

Dad ran his office like clockwork. "Don't be late for a doctor appointment," he emphasized. "It throws their whole schedule off and keeps others waiting." Yet he always made time to talk with his patients, to listen to their concerns, to help them through a rough patch.

Practicing in a small southern city in the 1950s and 60s, he never discriminated against Black patients. He scheduled their appointments toward the end of the day when his waiting room was empty of patients who might object. He earned the trust of the Black community and was often called to the Black hospital to assist with difficult births. It troubled him deeply when he wasn't called in time.

When my parents became elderly, I spent countless hours in waiting rooms, often viewing vignettes of life's fragility. Waiting while Dad's pacemaker was installed, I witnessed a doctor in surgical scrubs speaking with a family across the room. I couldn't hear what was said, but I remember the pain that spread across the young woman's face as she absorbed bad news, and the family joining hands in prayer. *There but for the grace of God, go I.* I learned to be grateful for my loved ones' longevity.

One night, in another hospital waiting room, my turn came. I held Dad's shaking hand and prayed while a stent threaded through my 97-year-old mom's blocked artery. Our prayers were answered. Although the cardiologist had given her only a slim chance, she survived.

In Dad's last years, often it seemed like he was sitting in his apartment, waiting to die. He'd outlived friends and had few visitors. His world was limited, quiet and, at times, grim. We focused on small comforts: sharing a fresh-baked apple pie; watching hummingbirds at the feeder; feeding handfuls of treats to my dogs, while the ticking clock wound down. At 101 years it stopped, but Dad's lessons of patience, kindness, and compassion continue to inspire.

Laurel Hunt

Asheville, North Carolina