

The Scabs We Have

Category: A Ray of Hope

written by Julie Miley Schlegel | December 13, 2023

In September, I was called back for dermatological surgery after a biopsy on my left calf revealed a severely dysplastic nevus—a result of the hours I spent tanning in the 1990s.

I canceled my morning clinic while I had the procedure. The surgeon took what she needed and stitched me up. The medical assistant put on a bandage and told me to keep the leg elevated for 12 hours.

Twelve hours, I thought, as I drove to my office to see my afternoon patients. Not going to happen. Like many physicians, I never took time off to heal. I went straight back to work.

Partway through the afternoon, I felt liquid running down my leg. As I continued to see patients, the upper half of the stitches pulled apart, like a zipper on a too-full suitcase.

I didn't have time to deal with an infection, so I took care of the incision from then on. I didn't exercise for two weeks. I did go to work but diligently applied hypoallergenic supplies.

Over the next two months, I waited as my body healed. The lower half of the scar was linear, well aligned, clean/dry/intact, as we say. But the upper half oozed and scabbed and finally formed a hard, black scab over the violent disruption my skin had endured.

The scab stayed there for weeks. "My leg looks like an umbilical stump," I told a colleague. As time passed, I wondered what was going on under the scab. I pictured the skin cells rallying, the black scar standing guard, allowing the softer tissue beneath to heal.

I then extrapolated, as I do, to think about the figurative scabs we use to protect our psyches. The scabs of cynicism and sarcasm that keep us from feeling hurt. The scab of resentment that covers up envy and jealousy. The scab of putting up a wall so we don't feel exposed. The scab of indifference so others won't see how vulnerable we are.

This week, just as I was wondering if my scab would be there forever, it finally came off in the shower. My body knew how long it was needed, even if I didn't. I saw, like a ray of hope, the pearly pink scar my body had formed over the previous 10 weeks.

Now that my scab is gone, maybe I'll turn my attention to the figurative scabs I wear, courtesy of working in healthcare during a pandemic. Some of the scabs of cynicism, resentment, wall-building, and indifference that shield my softer self have been there long enough. Maybe it's time to lose those scabs, too.

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