

Common Thread

Category: Stories

written by Peter de Schweinitz | March 9, 2012

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One sunny afternoon during my fourth year of medical school, I spent a day assisting a New Yorker turned rural Southern podiatrist. As we whittled dead skin, checked pulses and scheduled minor procedures, an arrogant question formed in my mind: *Why did you choose the feet instead of something more impressive, like the heart?*

Maybe he read my mind. Later, seeing me off to my car, he said, "I know that you medical doctors could do my job. I'm here so that you can do more important things."

At the time, I didn't know whether to pity his lack of aspiration or admire his humility. But a year later, when I was a primary-care intern, something happened that changed my perspective.

A patient I'd not met before, Carrie, had come for a post-operative wound infection on her ankle. This was the type of visit that irritated me—cleaning up for the specialist.

Sitting on a chair in the exam room was a slender, sophisticated-looking young woman with short-cropped hair, sleekly manicured nails and horn-rimmed glasses. Normally, I would have asked her to hop up onto the table. But for whatever reason—perhaps a combination of chivalry and a good night's rest—I bent a knee at her feet.

"What happened?" I said, cradling her heel. A red scar encircled the ankle. "Have you had a fever?"

"I've felt a little warm."

"Any red streaks up your legs, lumps in your groin?"

"No, I don't think so."

"That's good," I said, considering the correct dose of antibiotic. "So you're feeling pretty well overall?"

I looked up through the horn-rimmed frames into her hazel eyes, and the room became still.

"You know how everything just seems to come in waves?" she said quietly, as if testing the waters. Her gaze shifted to the tile floor, then returned to mine.

It just seems like everything that I've dreamed of—you know, the marriage that will sweep me off my feet, the children, the career, all that stuff—it

all just seems so, I don't know..."

I glanced down at her infection, uncertain how to respond to such honesty.

Carrie told me a bit more about herself. It turned out that she and I shared the same religious background, and that, like many in our religion, she had served a mission to a foreign country—somewhere in South America.

"I came home and expected that everything would just come together," she said. "I guess it did—in a way."

I had a thought: *Maybe a doctor can confide, too, as long as it benefits the patient.*

"I don't know, Carrie," I said. "My wife and I have the same problem."

She nodded, perhaps expecting me to say more. But I didn't.

Slowly, I stood, then walked over to sit on the doctor's stool. Despite my movements, the thread did not break. Ten or twenty seconds must have passed as we looked at each other.

Suddenly I experienced a strange visual phenomenon. Everything but Carrie's face—her neck, her hair, her torso and even the cream-colored wall in the background—disappeared. All that remained was a constellation of dancing points of golden-white light that shaped a three-dimensional image of her face. She looked like a hologram.

"Is any of this really true?" she said, meaning our religion.

"I don't know," I said. I held her gaze, and that appeared to be enough.

A wave of warmth seemed to pass between us.

"It's very strange," I said, breaking out of the role of doctor and into the role of lab buddy. "It's as if everything in the room has disappeared but your face."

She raised an eyebrow. "Even your body and your neck," I continued. "They've just disappeared."

She smiled, and then gave a small chuckle. "What do you see?"

I hesitated, afraid of sounding bizarre.

"It's like I'm seeing your spirit," I said, feeling sheepish.

She broke into a delighted smile. "How do I look?" she asked playfully.

As we were drawn together into this strange mirth, however, I suddenly realized that she was a pretty woman, and I a married doctor.

I pictured my two young medical assistants in the hall, nudging one another: "What do you think he's doing in there with her? Sure takes a long time to

treat a skin infection!" I thought of this new patient going home to tell her family and friends about the young physician with the odd manner.

"I'm sorry," I said, flushing. "I'm not usually like this with patients."

But Carrie didn't seem flustered.

"Really?" she said matter-of-factly. "This is good therapy. You ought to try it more often."

I wrote out her prescription, and she left, intending to go for infertility testing.

As I ponder the impact of this articulate woman on my professional and personal life, I realize how important her "therapeutic" decisions were. When I hesitated to share, she opened up readily. Where I was reticent about connecting, she taught me that intimacy was healing.

Not only did I find comfort in knowing that a woman of intelligence, strength and beauty might also suffer from religious doubts and the shame of infertility. Her affirmation of my personal sharing taught me that it was okay—maybe even helpful—to give more than just my "expert" or "professional" self.

I never saw Carrie again after that appointment. We did speak months later, however, when the results of her infertility tests, which she'd delayed getting, appeared on my desk. They were normal, and I called to tell her the news.

She sounded happy to hear from me, and I soon learned why.

"The tests don't matter anymore," she boasted. "I'm pregnant!"

Though I felt a trace of envy at her success, this feeling was surpassed by a sense of gratitude. Somehow the connection we'd forged seemed to make her success mine as well.

Perhaps I understand the podiatrist now. If he, too, was experiencing moments like these, what did he care if he were a neurosurgeon, a physical therapist, an orthopedist or a hairdresser? Maybe the power of our practice lies more in our ability to sustain the thread between us, and less in the point from which we string it.

About the author:

Peter de Schweinitz works as a family physician and public health practitioner for Tanana Chiefs Conference (Fairbanks, Alaska), and as an adjunct instructor for the University of Utah. He started writing stories about his experiences in medicine and patient care in the 1990s, during his fourth year of medical education, thanks to the University of Virginia's robust medical humanities program, led by Marcia Childress. "Well over a decade has passed since Carrie conceived a child. My dear wife Rebecca and I did not conceive—but Ben and Ming Lu, the two beautiful children we have been

privileged to adopt, are now fourteen and six.” Peter and his family live in Utah and Alaska.

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