

Desperately Seeking Herb Weinman

Category: Stories

written by Steven Lewis | March 15, 2013

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Minor chest pains that woke me early one morning—and which did not go away three, four, five, six hours later—landed me flat on my back at a local emergency room, a perversely comforting *beep beep beep* issuing from the monitor hanging precariously over my head.

Frankly, I didn't really think that I was having a heart attack—as a former EMT, a devoted watcher of medical television, and a cultural cousin of Woody Allen, I'm ridiculously well versed in the symptoms of a myocardial infarction. However, after I'd endured a morning of chest pains at an age where all warranties have lapsed, it was prudent to go to the hospital. And since my wife was out of town—and my grown kids off with their kids—I drove myself over to the ER.

Once the wraparound curtain was pulled to protect my flimsy privacy and the EKG was recording electrical impulses in my thumping heart, I already felt a little better. And yet I had never felt more alone in my life. So alone that every time a nurse or med-tech appeared I tried squeezing megabytes of information into those swishing curtains of opportunity. I let each of them know that I have seven kids...sixteen grandchildren...I am a writer...a teacher. That I actually have nicer clothes than those I was wearing.

Lying there on that narrow gurney, I fervently wished that Herb Weinman, our former family doctor, was still in practice. Since Herb hung up his stethoscope some years ago, I have not found a physician who would treat me as a friend. These days I go to various group practices the way I take the Toyota to a Jiffy Lube. I have a very nice—and I believe extremely competent—internist, but he doesn't know much about me except what is typed into my chart. For my prostate I see one of the three partners who don't remember me from yearly visit to yearly visit. And without the contact list on my cell phone, I could not tell you the names of my dermatologist or gastroenterologist.

Some of "my" physicians are good mechanics, some have nice bedside manners, and for all that I know, each one may be a better diagnostician than Herb. But none of them know me well enough to distinguish me from my symptoms—or my symptoms from somebody else's.

The emergency room brought that lonely truth home. Left alone in my curtained cubicle for ten or fifteen minutes at a time, I quickly became a detached observer of my own unremarkable situation. The busy ER staff were not disrespectful or callous or incompetent. But to them I was little more than what appeared on the computer screen: a series of parts, consequences and outcomes. I was an unexceptional case to be filed and forgotten as soon as another body was transferred to my stretcher.

In contrast, the elderly woman who was wheeled in on the gurney across the way was a *person*. I gleaned from the muffled conversations that she had a local doctor who had already spoken to the ER staff. She also had a desperately worried middle-aged son who was driving the nurses crazy with his questions about her labored breathing.

With her, the nurses' calm and cool voices became warm and engaging. And when her doctor cruised in like a breath of Caribbean air—and called her Ruth and held her hand and put his arm around her worried son—she smiled as if she was on the chaise lounge to recovery.

In contrast, I had a brief discussion with the attending doc, who seemed a little distracted and tired. He assured me that I was not having a heart attack, even offered me a scrip for discomfort as a consolation prize for not getting the Big One, as Redd Foxx used to call it. And after the doctor disappeared from my life forever, one of the nurses gave me two sheets of instructions—in case the symptoms recurred.

As far as I know, I am fine. “Chest Wall Pain” was the handy diagnosis, created I suppose to give a nondescript patient with a nonspecific ailment a quasi-medical term to tell family, friends and the insurance provider.

Of course I was relieved to find out that my ticker was still ticking away normally. Perhaps, finally, that is all that counts. But even now, a year later, the dull ache in my heart has not quite gone away. It has only moved from my chest wall to a place deeper in my being, a place undetectable by EKGs. It is a rueful reminder that the kind of family care that Herb Weinman once offered me and my family is becoming as obsolete and trivialized as a Norman Rockwell painting.

I know that the overworked ER staff who treated me were good and competent healthcare providers. But I also know that there was not a soul in the ER that day who would have cried if I had died. As Herb Weinman would.

And I want that. I want that.

About the author:

Steve Lewis teaches Microfiction/Nonfiction at the Sarah Lawrence College Writing Institute. His work has appeared in [Pulse](#), *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor* and [Talking Writing](#), where he is a contributing writer. His books include [Zen and the Art of Fatherhood](#), [The ABCs of Real Family Values](#), [Fear and Loathing of Boca Raton](#) and [A Month on a Barrier Island](#). “During the Sixties I was writing self-indulgent poetry in Madison, Wisconsin—mostly to meet girls—but in grad school, my mentor Jim Hazard gave me a nifty flashlight to navigate my way through the self-reflective shadows and into what I now understand is the illuminating voice. It is the most valuable gizmo in the battered tool chest I carry daily up to my writing room in the Shawangunk Mountains and into workshops in the Hudson Valley and on Hatteras Island, North Carolina.” Steve’s Web site is stevelewiswriter.com.

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