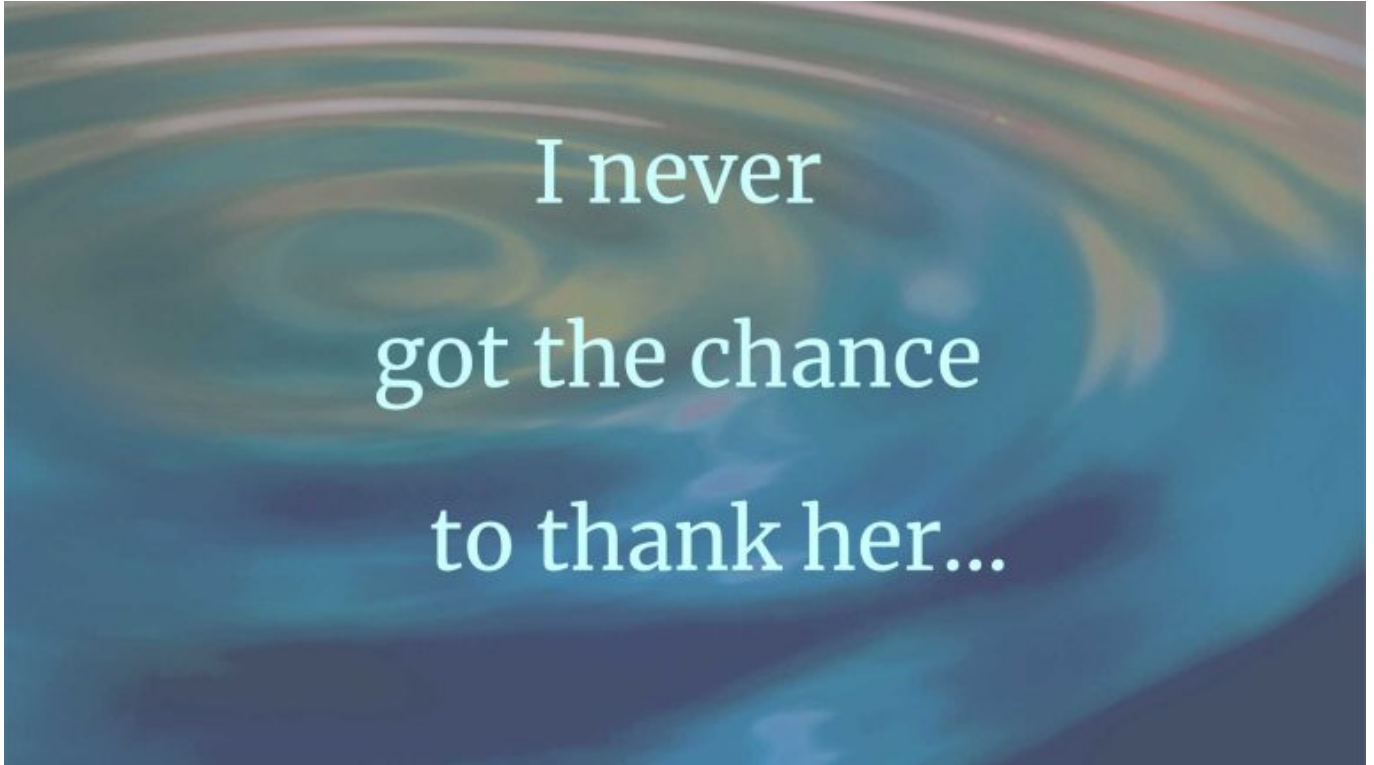


Medicine Without a Bottle

Category: Stories

written by Chris A. Smith | May 23, 2025



Editor's Note: May is National Nurses Month.

When is hope medicine?

In the middle of the night, a woman's feet quietly whisked across the hospital floor to my bed.

I was seventeen, grieving the death of my mother by suicide, and the loss of our family unit. I was the oldest, doing my best to keep everything and everyone together. My stepfather was absent, spending most of his time drinking at Lex's Lounge. My younger siblings alternated between staying at home or with our grandparents. By all accounts, it was a confusing chapter in our lives.

In the days, nights and weeks after my mother's death, my mind had been working overtime to understand why she'd taken her own life. The questions looped over and over: *How could she leave me? How could she leave us? What did I do wrong? Could I have been a better son? Should I have helped more?*

The world had radically changed. It would never be the same. I wasn't sure of my place in it anymore. Somewhere in this process, as I struggled with questions that refused to be resolved, hope unraveled like a story that had forgotten how to end well.

Anger grew in its place. I took this anger out on myself by neglecting my health until I became ill.

The malaise started off as fatigue and progressed to body aches and fever. My seventeen-year-old self interpreted these symptoms as part of my punishment for what had happened in our family: It was my responsibility to bear the weight of our tragedy.

Soon my breathing became labored, with periodic bouts of coughing that tore at my lungs. Friends urged me to see a doctor, but I shrugged it off.

In my mind, the suffering was penance for my mother's death. It was my way of bargaining with God: *Let my suffering make atonement for the sin of taking her life.* I could not let her go to hell.

Emotionally, I descended deeper into despair. I felt abandoned and betrayed. Deserted by my mother, and now by my body, I felt that pain was now my only reliable companion. I didn't talk to anyone; I couldn't. I didn't know how to express what was inside. There was no guide. No road map. Instead, I spend long days walking alone in the woods by my house, letting the silence outside hold the chaos within.

As I reflect on this today, it strikes me as strange—being so alone during an extremely stressful time. Was it that my family and friends didn't know how to talk to me? Or that I didn't know how to let them in? Likely both. In some ways, it was a quiet standoff between grief, confusion and hurt.

In desperation, I called on what had bolstered me through earlier trials: God. Now, however, for some reason, God was silent. No, no, it felt worse than that: God was mocking me.

When my growing fatigue left me unable to work at my summer job, I reluctantly made an appointment with the town physician.

He asked questions, took my temperature, looked down my throat and listened to my heart and lungs.

"Infectious mononucleosis," he told his nurse. "Let's give him an injection of..."

Typically, I wasn't afraid of needles—but as the nurse administered the shot, I broke into a cold sweat and felt a sudden urge to vomit. Then I lost consciousness.

When I came to, the doctor and nurse were bending over me. The doctor held my wrist, feeling my pulse as he listened to my heart. The nurse was studying the doctor's face. Both looked surprised and serious.

"We need to get you to the hospital," the doctor said.

In the hospital, I was confined to bed, an IV in my arm. I was alone. I had a sense that my body was no longer fighting for me; now it was actively working against me.

I felt feverish; the hospital gown was soaked. My lungs were angry. Something foreign had made a home in them, and, in response, they worked to eject the

invaders by coughing incessantly.

My whole attention was fixed on the unpleasant sensations tormenting my body. It wasn't just my lungs. Sometimes it was the tightness in my chest, robbing me of a full in-breath. Sometimes it was the throbbing in my head. My aching back kept me from finding a position that might ease the discomfort. Uncomfortable and restless, I wanted to run away, but felt too weak.

In this moment, I didn't care about anything. I didn't care for my life. I didn't care about school. I didn't care about my parents. I didn't care about God. I hated my life

God, kill me, I silently implored, then thought, *How can it end this way?*

It didn't seem fair.

Late in the evening, someone walked into the room. I didn't look up. I was too exhausted.

Who can help, anyway? I thought.

The nurse who walked in didn't poke a needle into my arm, pour a glass of water or place pills in a paper cup. Instead, she sat on the hospital bed without saying a word, placed a hand on my back and began rubbing gently.

For the first time in months, I felt my thoughts and questions slowing down. The pain was still present—but something else had entered my awareness, although I didn't understand it.

As the nurse massaged my back, my tears began to pour into the pillow. I don't know how long this lasted. My grief, anger and depression softened. When my crying subsided, the nurse quietly stood and disappeared into the hallway—her footsteps kissing the floor.

Years later, I finally understood what she had done. Through touch and presence, she had quietly communicated that despite my pain, brokenness and grief, I was still worthy of life and love. If she could see this in me, then maybe, just maybe, I could learn to see it too, someday.

This was the medicine that saved my life.

It gave me the strength to recover and go home to continue the process of healing. Although my relationship with my stepfather remained unchanged, I slowly began to open up to friends and other family members, eventually making my way to therapy.

I never knew the nurse's name, and I never saw her again. But I'm here today because of her.

I never got the chance to thank her—so I'm doing it now, here, in these lines. They're meant not only for this nurse but for all of the healers in scrubs who show up, day after day, shift after shift, offering medicine

without a bottle.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Nurses save lives—not only through their medical training but through something equally potent: their presence and compassion.

The medicine without a bottle.