

# No One Ever Asked

Category: Stories

written by Suzanne Minor | July 3, 2020



“I've always  
felt a little  
different...”

Today I greet Mr. Williams verbally, which is very different for us; usually we say hello with a hug.

“Mr. Williams,” I say, “I’m not going to hug you today, with this pandemic.”

“I get that, Doc,” he answers, adjusting his mask; I can’t tell if he’s smiling or not.

Our visit moves forward easily; we’ve known each other for more than three years and see each other regularly for his care. As in the past, he’s brought along his son Terrell, age four.

“Wow, your blood pressure is amazing. And that blood sugar. Perfect. Could not be better!” I try to infuse my voice and eyes with my smile, doing my best to compensate for the mask that covers the bottom half of my face. “Do you need any refills?”

We discuss his chronic medical issues, as we do at each visit. Systematically, I click through the tabs on the electronic medical record, reviewing and updating each item: History of Present Illness, Past Medical History, Medications, Allergies, Family History. Then I get to Social History.

I set my laptop aside.

“Mr. Williams, how have you been doing this week? I can imagine that you might be having a really tough time.”

Mr. Williams is a Black man, and last week, George Floyd was murdered.

Mr. Williams looks at me, and his eyes well up, glisten and overflow. He grasps a tissue and crushes it over his eyes, pushing his mask askew.

I let him cry for a moment, and his son stops playing his video game to look at his dad.

"No one's asked me about that," Mr. Williams says quietly.

"I'm here for you, Mr. Williams," I say. "How can I support you?"

He makes a sound—a whoosh of breath, sad and poignant and hard to describe on paper. His tears keep flowing.

"This is hard times. This is like when Martin Luther King was killed. I was young, and I watched the riots from my window. I watched it burn."

He takes another tissue, looks at me and slowly shakes his head. "Watched it burn. It was horrible. This is like that."

He pauses, then says, "It's like that, but it's *not* like that. This time it feels different."

He closes his hand around the tissue, then repeats: "This time feels different."

"I feel that too, though I wasn't alive when Martin Luther King Jr. was killed," I reply. "I think I understand. This feels like something is happening."

"I'm old, I know." I hear the smile in his voice, coming through the tears. He works his jaw slightly, shifting his face mask from side to side. "This feels different. This feels different, and I hope. From my apartment, I used to watch the Black Panthers do their drills. That was horrible. This feels different."

Another long pause.

"Mr. Williams, what else?"

He makes that sound again, a grief-filled whoosh of exhalation.

"Doc. We are having this talk." He presses the tissue to his eyes again. "I can't get away from this. I look Black...Did you know that one of my granddaddies was white?"

I shake my head.

"I look Black, but I have three like my son." He points to his son, whose olive-toned skin contrasts with his own deep buckeye-brown skin. He continues, "I looked different from them, didn't fit in."

I realize that he must be referring to his three brothers.

"My friends who know me, they say I'm the most white Black person they know, or that I'm just a little bit different; but they don't know *how*," he says, his tears still flowing. "I've always felt a little different. I've always had to deal with this. I live this and can't get away from it."

If this were a nonpandemic visit, I'd be sitting beside him with my hand on his shoulder. But we're in the midst of a pandemic here in Miami, with new cases increasing every day.

I look at him, trying to send him love and respect across the room, hoping that my heart can reach out to his across the empty space, and that he'll feel this even through my mask and the distance between us.

Gradually, Mr. Williams's tears trail off. He looks at me.

"No one's asked me about that. Thank you." He gives a large nod and exhales again.

"I'm here for you. My pleasure." We hold each other's eyes and nod.

On my drive home, I reflect on Mr. Williams's visit. It was the sad and beautiful highlight of my day. I'm heartbroken that such conversations are called for—that, as Mr. Williams said, we're watching it burn again.

*When will we overcome institutional racism and oppression?* I wonder. It seems too big, too daunting—and yet there was beauty in this interaction.

Now I'm the one who's crying. This conversation is a real, very tangible personal moment for me amid the upwelling of protests and unified voices in the wake of George Floyd's filmed murder.

I feel so humbled that our relationship allowed for the incredible intimacy and vulnerability in the room today—that I could be in the conversation with an open heart, and that we could relate beyond our contrasting skins.

This conversation gives me hope for the future, for our nation, for our world. It gives me hope for our chances of being able to work on this ongoing, purulent wound in our lives and our society. Because Mr. Williams and I could talk this way—openly, gently, sincerely—I feel hopeful that over time we'll all be able to do this, and move forward together.

*What can I do to help the process?* I wonder.

To me, right now, the answer seems clear: I need to stay willing to commit the time and energy needed to talk and listen to the people of color in my life. I need to keep the courage to ask, and the open heart to receive.