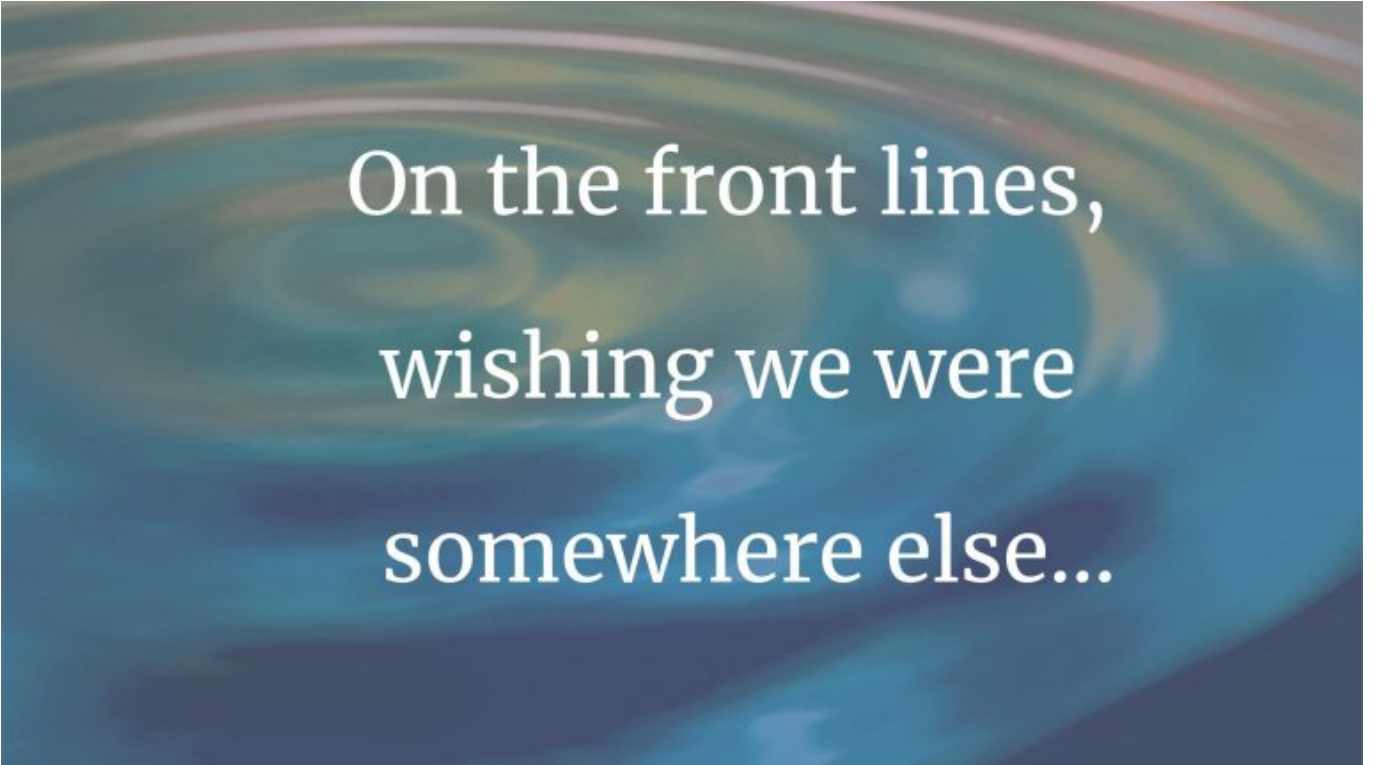


Please Don't Call Us Heroes

Category: Stories

written by Judy Fleishman | May 19, 2020



On the front lines,
wishing we were
somewhere else...

The people I work with don't want to be called heroes. Don't misunderstand me. I am a psychologist and medical educator in a family-medicine residency that serves a diverse, multilingual immigrant population. I work with healthcare providers of all stripes—family-medicine residents and attending physicians, medical receptionists, medical assistants, case workers and clinic managers. My colleagues are profoundly dedicated, talented, hardworking, flexible, creative and compassionate. They absolutely want to do everything they can to help patients during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These folks typically work in primary care. Under normal circumstances, they help patients to navigate their lives and take ownership of their bodies and their health.

My colleagues treat hypertension and diabetes, bring babies into the world and shepherd their long-term patients through the last stages of life.

These healthcare workers don't see their everyday work as heroic, and it won't be seen as such by those who like to crown "heroes," but I know that their daily work, their chosen work, involves much real heroism.

Be that as it may, right now they can't do their chosen work—because, ironically, they're facing an emergency in which their patients need them more than ever.

Now they have been deployed to work in our community hospitals, treating large numbers of rapidly deteriorating COVID-19 patients. No one is to blame for this state of affairs; it's essential and important work. But my coworkers are being sent to do work that they never asked to do.

They are not people who enlisted in the Army or joined disaster-relief efforts. Now they see their patients, who are often people of color,

suffering far more illness and death than others. They see patients' family members exploding in rage and despair because they cannot be with their hospitalized loved ones, whom they may never see alive again. They are seeing dead bodies lining the hospital halls because there's no room in the hospital morgue. They worry for themselves and for their own family members.

From hearing them express their thoughts and feelings in personal conversations, support groups and structured-reflection groups, I've learned this important truth: When we thank them for being heroes, sometimes it just makes them feel worse.

Heroes are people idealized for their courage and noble qualities, for choosing to put the welfare of others before their own, for doing good for the sake of doing good. All of these qualities imply a sense of agency and choice.

The people I work with never wanted to be heroes. They don't feel proud of the work they're now doing. They don't feel able to do a good job, because our knowledge of and tools for fighting this disease are inadequate. They feel angry and terrified and powerless.

Calling them heroes makes them feel ashamed of having these feelings. It leaves them feeling deeply misunderstood, and sometimes very alone. It makes them feel bad that they, in fact, don't want to be doing this work—and that showing up under duress and doing their very best in an impossible situation isn't good enough.

They do deserve all of our thanks for making such significant sacrifices. But instead of calling them heroes, perhaps we should be saying: "We're so sorry. We're sorry that you are so understandably feeling depleted and discouraged. And we're sorry that you have no choice about whether or not to work, because you need your paycheck or need to complete your training or are committed to returning to serving your patients when all this is over."

Or perhaps we should simply bow down in prayer, sharing our pain and our powerlessness—and our hope that, someday soon, peace and solace will come to us all.

About the author:

Judy Fleishman, a psychologist, is director of behavioral science and leadership development at the Tufts University family-medicine residency at Cambridge Health Alliance in Malden, MA, and an assistant clinical professor at Tufts University Medical School. "I don't consider myself a writer. But the anguish and anger I felt while bearing witness to my colleagues' experiences on the front lines compelled me to write this piece."