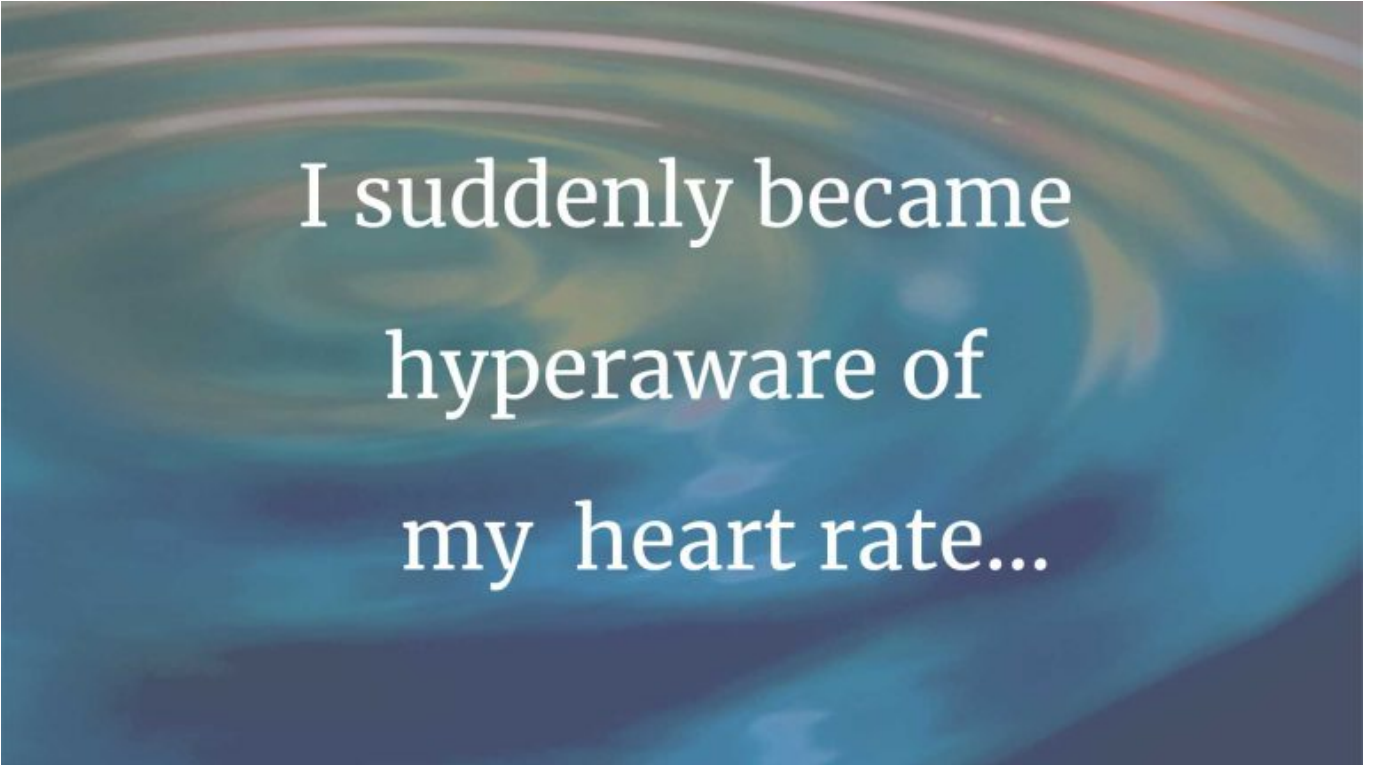


Resilience Has a Voice, If We Listen

Category: Stories

written by Karen Kikuta | December 26, 2025



I suddenly became
hyperaware of
my heart rate...

City of God is more than just a film. It is an unflinching depiction of organized crime in Brazil, as seen through the eyes of Rocket, a young boy who dreams of escaping the violence overwhelming his community, the Rio de Janeiro slum known as Cidade de Deus.

Watching the film as a high-school senior, I was struck by its raw, vivid storytelling and by the brutal realities of the country I call home.

Growing up in a stable Brazilian family, with access to education, health care and opportunity, I was fortunate. I'd glimpsed hardship in the rural communities where some of my loved ones lived, but not until I saw *City of God* did I understand the depth of my privilege. It was humbling.

Years later, as a medical student in the US, a year-long global-health project in Rio de Janeiro gave me an opportunity to reconnect with my culture.

My primary goal was to study the long-term effects of prenatal Zika virus exposure and to interview the families of children who'd been affected. I spent every day at a pediatrics clinic, interviewing families for the study, and between interviews I helped with patient encounters.

I'd watch the patients file in from the waiting room, perspiring after multiple bus rides, and carrying multiple bags that crackled with appointment slips, hospital documents and the little blue *caderneta de saúde* (health booklet) that recorded a child's vaccinations and weights. The clinical

details mattered—but so did other details: a father folding and refolding an ink-smudged appointment slip as his eyes flicked to the wall clock; a grandmother murmuring “*se Deus quiser*” (“God willing”) when the attending physician mentioned a possible opening on a waitlist. I realized that the most profound lessons would come not from textbooks or research but from listening.

I listened to Lupita, a mother from the City of God. She told me about her daughter’s mysterious nosebleeds and the growing bony lesion on the girl’s forehead; about the small bumps (*molluscum contagiosum*) spreading across the skin of her youngest; about the undiagnosed genetic syndrome of her granddaughter. But illness was only one piece of her reality.

“I waited two years for a specialist,” Lupita said. “Two years. My name was on a list, but it felt like it never moved.”

Two years just to reach a first appointment in Brazil’s Unified Health System, known as SUS.

“In my community, some days we don’t even have hot water,” she continued. “So we don’t have a pharmacy, and the closest one often runs out of basic medicines for weeks.”

I couldn’t help measuring that reality against my own childhood. My family had had private insurance. The contrast was stark: When I’d spiked a fever with a simple upper respiratory infection, my mother called our clinic, and I was seen the same week. We had a car; she could drive me across town and wait with me, because she wasn’t juggling multiple jobs.

It seemed clear that Lupita was trusting me with more than just her children’s medical history. I paused and set my notes aside.

“With everything you’re carrying, how are you managing to get through each day?” I asked.

She went quiet, as if weighing whether to hand me a heavier truth.

“*Tem uma coisa que eu não te falei,*” she said. (“There is something I didn’t tell you.”) She hesitated. “There are three little ones at home now. But there used to be four.”

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“My son was twelve. He was just walking home. There was shooting down the street. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

She took a breath and looked down.

“This happened a year ago. It happens so often in my community, you stop asking why.” She looked back up at me. “You know, I still make dinner, make sure the little ones finish their homework. In the morning, I get up and go to work. What else can I do?”

I listened, now with a lump in my throat. At age twelve, I rode my bike after school, or walked to Blockbuster with a friend. Two kids on our own, not looking over our shoulders. That contrast wasn't abstract; it sat between us in that small exam room.

What stayed with me was not just the frustration in Lupita's voice, but the resilience—the quiet, weary strength of a mother who carries the weight of loss, responsibility and an uncertain future, moving ahead because she has no other choice.

Preparing to leave, she met my eyes and said softly, "Thank you for listening. Not many people ask."

Another encounter, outside of the clinic, taught me even more about the power of listening. While getting a haircut, I sat in the salon chair, scrolling through my phone and making small talk with my hairdresser, Marisa.

She asked what I did for a living. When I said I was a medical student, she fell silent.

Then, looking me in the eye, she said, "A doctor saved my life last year."

I put down my phone.

"I had fevers almost every day," she said. "I couldn't eat. I couldn't get out of bed."

She showed me pictures of herself from that time. The sunken-eyed, skeletal woman in the photos was hard to reconcile with the vibrant woman before me.

"The doctors kept telling me my tests were fine," she said, "but I knew something was wrong. I did not feel 'fine.' I felt helpless—until one doctor refused to send me away."

She smiled. "That doctor told me, 'We will figure this out.' She repeated tests, called a referral center herself and got me an appointment. I was finally diagnosed with tuberculosis."

I felt stunned. She tapped my shoulder to share the disbelief.

"Even after I went somewhere else, that first doctor kept checking on me by phone," she said. "She walked me through everything, made sure I had all the pills. She made sure I was okay."

As she spoke, I thought about how different my path would have been. Earlier this year, when my mother had developed sudden, severe headaches, my father and I, both in medicine, pushed for evaluations to rule out serious causes. We knew whom to call and how to ask—and we had the language to insist. For Marisa, with no medical professionals in her family, one physician's choice to listen—one single act of advocacy—had literally made the difference between life or death.

Listening to her, I realized with renewed force that illness is never just

about the body. It is also about the weight of having to wait for years to receive care. It is about the grief of a mother who buries her child. It is about the exhaustion of fighting a health system that was not built for you.

Listening to and being present with Lupita and Marisa, I felt compelled to confront the stark differences in our circumstances. My life has been marked by security and readily available medical care; theirs, by scarcity and medical systems that often turn them away. And yet, despite those constraints, what I saw most in them was resilience—the strength of individuals who kept showing up, sharing what they had and trying again. My awareness of privilege became something more profound: a responsibility to see, to hear and to act.

City of God opened my eyes. Medicine helped me to open my ears, to learn more about the people in my native country. And the people I met there—Lupita, Marisa and others—have taught me that in the spaces where illness, sorrow and inequity linger, listening is not optional: It is our most powerful tool.