

Thanksgiving 2023

Category: Stories

written by Laura Fry | November 22, 2024



My slow walk home that Thanksgiving took me across Central Park West...

It has been years, decades really, since I have watched television. I have the box, watch movies, but haven't had cable ever. My two children were in first and second grade when I divorced their dad, and the house we moved into had no reception.

"Oh, well," I told them, "no TV." They were too little to grumble, but years later my daughter thanked me, saying, "We did so many other things."

Now I find myself newly single and in transition for the winter, living in a rented house with—you guessed it—a TV with a full complement of channels and full reception. I have been here for two months and just now tried—for the second time—to figure out the dizzying array of options, trying to get to something I actually wanted to watch.

My reason for trying this again yesterday is that it was Thanksgiving morning. I was futzing around cooking for a small party and wanted to watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. After an astoundingly small number of trials, there it was!

Not a half an hour into it, putting finishing touches on stuffing, I sat for a few minutes in front of the tube and found myself tearing up. Crying at a holiday parade.

The vivid memory that unexpectedly opened this floodgate dated from about forty-five years ago.

Before becoming a doctor, I worked for ten years as a nurse. For about eight of those years, I worked as an inpatient nurse at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. This was in the late Seventies and early Eighties: Among the very ill oncology patients were also the first groups of gay men dying in droves of a disease at first unnamed, and now known as HIV/AIDS.

I mostly worked night shifts, 11:00 pm to 7:00 am, and frequently walked home to my studio apartment near Lincoln Center, the walk taking me across Central Park. On one particular Thanksgiving eve, I spent all of my night helping a young man with unrelenting leukemia hang on to what tenuous shreds of life he could.

As so often with acute myelogenous leukemia (AML), short remissions would be followed by brutal relapses, followed by more chemotherapy, combating the horrible side effects with unending antibiotics, antifungals and transfusions. Many medicines caused profoundly low potassium, which required IV replacements, all through the patients' increasingly sparse peripheral veins. We floor nurses managed all of this.

This young man was married and had two school-age boys. To this day I can picture his room on the fourth floor. His wife had been staying with him almost constantly in those last days, when his battle was being lost in true misery.

I knew that their boys were gearing up for football games over the holiday weekend.

"Will they come to say goodbye to their dad?" I asked his wife.

"No," she told me. "I don't want their memory of every Thanksgiving after this to be the horror of seeing their father die, with all of the lines in his body, and the blood, and the mess of it all..."

That night I was in the room more often than not, checking lines, listening for signs of worsening distress, chasing labs and interns. In the morning I left exhausted, sure that I would not see this family again. I did not.

My slow walk home that Thanksgiving morning took me across Central Park West, where the Macy's Parade was making its way south to 34th Street. The sidewalks were crowded with families cheering the colorful procession on. I saw one very happy family man with a few frolicking boys, the youngest one riding on his shoulders for a better view—and the tears poured out of me in grief and anger at what seemed an absurdly unfair hand dealt to my sick family.

I pushed my way through crowds and clowns, past tourists and trombones, to my apartment less than a block away, and cried myself to a brief sleep.

That Saturday, I grabbed a bus to New Jersey, rushed into the warm and welcoming arms of my mom and whatever assorted siblings and friends were around and soothed my sorrows in their food, love and understanding. Not that I ever said much about my nights, just: "It was a tough shift."

This was just one of many tough shifts I had in those days. There were many mornings of tears, and throughout the fall and winter I spent almost every Sunday evening going to the local Lutheran church, where they had vespers and performed Bach cantatas.

In that lovely setting, hearing that music that resonated so deeply, I would pour out my sadness. And very often I would silently rail at God.

Why the hell do these people and their families have to suffer so much, over weeks and years? And where the hell are You in all this?

Those years as a cancer nurse guided both my faith and my path to becoming a doctor. My friends and colleagues had assumed that I would go into oncology—but it was the care we nurses were able to give our patients and their families, and the importance of knowing all of their medical histories, and understanding what made them cry at night, that drew me in. And family medicine has been my career for more than thirty years.

I have taken these many patients and their experiences with me and let their voices guide me as I've cared for families over many decades. And after so many years of my asking the "why bad things happen to good people" questions, God and I still talk—although now I do more listening, and it's a bit more of a two-way conversation.