

Commentary

A woman is engaged in the simple task of preparing breakfast for herself and her husband. Each small action radiates deliberateness and appreciation—the placement of the silverware, the stirring, stepping out to place the seeds in the bird feeder. This is a woman secure in the routines of her life, grateful for the simplicity and beauty she finds in them. As well, she is eager to extend her benevolence beyond herself and her loved one to creatures that are vulnerable and frail. Surrounded by the wings of flying birds, she is filled with a sense of all that is holy.

In the midst of this sacred moment, she remembers the mother of a dying teenager and the devastating image of the child sitting up in her bed and crying out her fear and helplessness: *What should I do?*

There are no answers. The woman returns to her breakfast eggs and her loving husband, whose love nurtures her like rains striking a dusty tree. But the mother and her dead child are a part of her, carried forever in her pocket. The woman remembers the wisdom of the mother: “Bear yourself up . . . to receive what is given.” Take care of each other with tenderness. It is not an answer to suffering, frailty, and vulnerability, but it is *almost* an answer. It is as close as we can come to an answer in this world.

Reading this poem with a group of fourth-year students in an elective class called “The Art of Doctoring” provokes a heartfelt discussion. Some students identify with the narrator. They see themselves in her—living fortunate lives that allow for order and care, surrounded by the love of family and significant others. These students relate to the narrator’s “calling” as well—her desire to protect and nurture those who are imperiled and vulnerable. They see such an urge as the driving force behind their choice to become physicians.

Other students confess that, at times, they feel like the dying adolescent, trapped in a

life that makes no sense, screaming out to an apparently silent world, “What should I do?” They seek an answer but can find none. They often feel overwhelmed by the suffering they encounter around them. These students may be struggling with burnout, and they have not yet been able to find a balance between the good they can do and the distress they must witness in order to do that good.

Still other students are in awe of the mother who endures the loss of her child and yet manages to extract a measure of wisdom from this devastating experience. They speculate about the courage it must have taken to witness her daughter’s rage and despair, to simply stay and be present with her. They hope one day to emulate her courage and love.

The message of the poem itself generates different reactions. How do we respond when confronted with helplessness and innocent suffering? The cry of the daughter reverberates in the hearts of these sensitive and caring students. They want to offer her a response, whether biomedical or emotional or spiritual. The mother suggests that, although no complete answer exists, still we must try. “Hold yourself up,” she counsels, take care of yourselves, accept what life sends, and help each other with as much gentleness and care as can be mustered. Students explore whether such an attitude has a place in medicine.

In the first part of the mother’s message, many students recognize a variant of the common adage that the heart beats to itself first. They are reassured that, to stay at her child’s bedside, the mother had to figure out a way to “hold herself up” as well as hold up her daughter. Such counsel strengthens the students’ resolve to care for themselves through connection with their patients.

Other students are lifted up to discover as a role model someone who endures the worst imaginable in life, the loss of a

child, yet can still speak with thankfulness for what is given—the cup, the egg, the birds, the love of a spouse, and yes, the life of a daughter—and continue to love and care for others. We consider the practice of gratitude, the commitment to finding something on a daily basis to appreciate and cherish no matter what else is happening, and how such a practice can inform and inspire a life in medicine.

Finally, we talk about what it might mean to “feed” each other “with tenderness.” Feeding, of course, is nurturance and sustenance, and students reflect on how they do these things for their fellow students and patients, both literally and metaphorically. The discussion takes an interesting turn when one student wonders about “feeding” residents and even attending physicians. Some students feel that this is “not their job,” but the original student offers the intriguing metaphor of imagining herself being surrounded by a flock of birds, some with the faces of loved ones, others representing patients and peers, and still others wearing the visage of an annoying resident or a demanding attending.

Several students are uncomfortable that the mother’s conclusion is not “an answer,” because, above anything, they long for an answer. They want a resolution of the child’s suffering, some explanation for why it makes sense. They speak with bitterness—“A child’s death is just pointless”—or in platitudes—“Death may have ended her misery.” It is hard to accept that, at times, there are no perfect answers. Yet in medicine, “almost an answer” must sometimes suffice, and somehow we must learn how to accept almost-answers with gratitude and tenderness. We must learn to carry that mother and child in our pockets.

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