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COMMENTARY

Ambivalence and On Thinking About Atonement with a Parent

JOHANNA SHAPIRO, PHD

Poetry is meant to move below and beyond the surface of things. Take the following poems, for example. One is about numbers, the other about photos, both ordinary and straightforward "things," small and unworthy of much notice. We say, "That is a room number; it identifies the location of a room" or "That is a photograph—me at 16 in 1965." But these poems help us understand that *everything* matters if we are paying attention. Both numbers and photographs have an ineluctable relationship with time. Numbers are used to mark the passing of time, to identify unique moments in time. Photos likewise remind us of time gone by. In a sense, both are memento mori.

Joseph Freeman contemplates one of the ways in which the healthcare system impersonalizes patients, identifying them by room and bed number. It is a detail we take for granted, write off as unimportant, a necessary but meaningless symbol. By choosing to reflect on these apparently insignificant numbers, Freeman is able to discern some of their meanings: the sheer quantity of the suffering of patients; the amount of uncertainty in medicine; the relative time spent becoming sick and being diagnosed as sick; the common mnemonics and diagnoses that keep medicine—and often, the patient—going. Finally, amid these various numbers—evocative of the myriad other numbers that define modern medicine (lab values, test results, vital signs, admission and discharge dates, time of death)—the narrator discovers oneness. The impersonal "Bed 1" suddenly is filled not only with the patient's body, but with the patient's particular self, the patient's unique story. Freeman realizes that this singularity pertains not only to the patient but also to the student and to the medical team. The way the student worries about this patient, even the way he enters the room, are also unique; these are events and attitudes that occur and then are irrevocably gone. He will never approach or worry about a different patient in quite the same way. Experience is always ultimately particular and, once experienced, can never be reproduced or recaptured.

Laurie Preisendanz's poem wonderfully captures this poignancy of a vanished past in the contemplation of a simple photograph. As I read this poem, I picture not the hundreds of digitalized images collected in a single day on an ambitious teen's cell phone cam, but a framed photograph, perhaps sitting on the bedside table

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Johanna Shapiro, 1009 Canyon View Drive, Laguna Beach, CA 92651. E-mail: jfshapir@uci.edu

of a hospital room, or casually forgotten on a mantelpiece—the kind of photograph that reminds you not of 30 seconds ago, but of 30 years ago. Sometimes such photographs are almost unbearable—our younger, more promising selves, confidently embracing a life that existed, at least in part, only in our imagination. They show us a place where hope and possibility, brightness and light, can disappear or turn to rust. Reminders of what we have lost and the shaky shadows that remain. Why do we even hang on to such things? Preisendanz provides a wise and consoling answer. For patients and doctors to move forward, for *people* to move forward, we need the courage to reconcile with these irreplaceable past moments. With resolute clarity, we must see both what was and what is. We must come to peace with our losses, rekindle our hope, "dream new dreams," and pray for a little grace to "stretch for what can be." That is what those photos give us and that is why we keep them.