

The Book

HAD HE BEEN BORN AT A DIFFERENT TIME OR IN A DIFFERENT place, he might have been a character actor in the movies, a regular in the chorus on the Shakespearean stage, or a traveling troubadour. As it was, he was just barely bumping along at the margins, cheerful as could be.

His outward appearance was startling: His face was disproportionately large, and his mop of dark hair was always wild. In conversation, you had to choose which of his eyes to engage. His animated limbs were gangly and their final resting places unpredictable. His high-pitched voice did not seem to fit his long, lean body. When he folded himself into the examination room chair, his hand shot out in greeting, an innocent smile washed over his face, and he squeaked, "Hi, Doc!" He was, safe to say, a memorable character.

My first encounter with him came immediately after he noticed "a little trouble swallowing." When I examined his throat, I found the largest, most extensive cancer I had ever seen involving someone's tongue, tonsil, palate, larynx, and pharyngeal wall. His treatment options were extremely limited. After a workup and discussion at our clinic's weekly tumor conference, he was scheduled for what we assumed would be a marginally effective short course of high-dose-per-fraction palliative radiation.

Surprisingly, he had a brisk and encouraging early response. After the first few radiation sessions, his regimen was switched to a standard curative course. His tumor continued to melt. I assumed that he would never swallow again, given the amount of scar tissue that normally develops after such treatment. Wrong again. He recovered steadily and resumed his previous life not long after treatment was completed. No scars, no significant adverse effects. He had a little pain that was completely controlled by a mild narcotic. He was one of our "miracles," and we told him this.

He was delighted that he had surprised us by being cured and by staying alive. At every visit, he would laugh, "You really didn't think I would make it, did you, Doc?" Although my involvement in his treatment had been very limited—after all, my only task had been to refer him on to the radiation oncologists—he always greeted me warmly and thanked me profusely.

The miraculous cure held up over time. We settled into a follow-up routine that required fewer and less-frequent visits. He called occasionally for refills of his pain medication, but there was no up-tick in the pill count, so we would contact the pharmacy with authorizations. With every call,

he would tell our administrative assistant, who by this time was new and had never met him, what a great surgeon I was. As she relayed each message, I always smiled, assuming that the compliments had more to do with making certain he was able to get timely prescription refills than any personal feeling for me.

Several years later, I received a package from him. Inside was a used book with a torn dust jacket, bent corners, and a price tag that read "25¢." It was a biography of Dr Tom Dooley, published in the early 1960s. Along with the book, my patient had enclosed a handwritten note, written in pencil, thanking me for "being the best doctor I know." No other explanation. I wondered at the gesture, shook my head, and set the book aside, unread.

I recall now that I had always intended to respond to the gift, but I did not. A thank-you note would have taken just a few seconds. Of course, I rationalized that he might not even receive the note because of the transient nature of his lifestyle. Perhaps, though, I was uncertain of the meaning of the gift. I left note-writing for another day, perhaps hoping to eventually find the right words. Before long, preparing a response dropped entirely off my mental priority to-do list.

Winters in Wisconsin can be harsh. A couple of years later, when the snows finally started to thaw in March, some kids discovered his partially submerged body in a park lagoon across the road from where he had last lived. The newspaper, in a one-paragraph story, noted that his roommate had reported him missing late that December. There was no further information other than that he had no known relatives.

I was stunned and abashed. Now that he was gone, I finally retrieved the book. Tom Dooley, it turns out, had established a network of charity health facilities for the poor people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in the 1950s. In 1960, a Gallup Poll identified him as one of America's Ten Most Admired Men. Dooley had known Albert Schweitzer, and Dooley's work was credited with inspiring the birth of the Peace Corps. When Dr Dooley developed malignant melanoma and died in 1961 at the age of 34, the world mourned his short but incredibly productive life. As I breathed in the musty pages, I wondered: Had my patient read this book before he sent it to me? Had I *really* reminded him of this dynamic, virtuous, unselfish physician who improved the lives of thousands of people? Or was the book meant to inspire me to

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approximate Dooley's character? I would be left to forever ponder these questions. Before long, I had deliberately recycled the note and given away the book because the gift that had, until then, barely stirred me now made me feel unworthy.

His gift had been a simple act of grace. My inability to celebrate his gesture resurfaced and burned in me anew when I later read Robert Coles' introduction to William Carlos Williams' *The Doctor Stories*. Dr Coles writes:

"Presumptuousness and self-importance are the wounds this life imposes upon those privy to the wounds of others. The busy, capable doctor, well aware of all the burdens he must carry, and not in the least inclined to shirk his duties, may stumble badly in those small moral moments that con-

stantly press upon him or her—the nature of a hello or goodbye, the tone of voice as a question is asked or answered, the private thoughts one has, and the effect they have on our face, our hands as they do their work, our posture, our gait."

Was my failure to respond to a fellow human being who was balanced precariously on life's precipice a sign of my own arrogance?

Perhaps.

I know it's far too late in coming (and I really do apologize for that) but, Jack, my friend, thanks for the book. And rest in peace.

Bruce H. Campbell, MD
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
bcampbel@mcw.edu

A book is the only place where you can examine a fragile thought without breaking it, or explore an explosive idea without fear it will go off in your face.
—Edward P. Morgan (1910-1993)