

The Perpetual Lesson
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Saturdays rarely fulfill the pledge of rest people promise themselves every Monday as a reward for surviving another workweek. One weekend in June 1981 started off as an exception. It was late afternoon. My husband and I had just enjoyed a day of swimming and water skiing. We sat on the front porch, which overlooks the lake, so we could enjoy a few more precious moments of relaxation. I allowed my senses to be entertained while savoring the “good tired” feeling that prevailed. It was in contrast to the “not so good tired” feeling one experiences as a family physician. The shimmer of the late afternoon sunlight dancing on the water appeared in concert with the crescendo-decrescendo movement of waves created by passing motor craft. The steady drone of boat engines was hypnotic and only interrupted by the squeals of children tubing or the occasional bark of a neighborhood dog. It was a luxury to be immersed in the moment, oblivious to the world beyond the range of my senses. The warm breeze I felt against my face brought smells of suntan lotion and the hint of lilacs and roses. We left the idyllic setting of the porch to start preparing dinner. The police scanner perched on the kitchen counter began to squawk. A distorted voice said that a boating accident had just taken place across the lake from where we were. My husband, a physician, suggested we go to the scene to help. I was two weeks away from completing a family medicine residency and moonlighted three to four shifts a month in the emergency room. I was confident that we could handle whatever awaited us.

As we arrived at the scene of the accident and exited the car, my senses, which a few minutes earlier had been soothed, were now being assaulted. I scanned the area quickly, trying to process what my eyes saw but my brain could not grasp. A motorboat was loosely tied to a dock at the water’s edge. Two men in their late thirties were sitting motionless on the ground that gently sloped from the road to the lake’s shore. Sitting nearby, sobbing softly, was a girl about twelve years old wearing a blue-striped bathing suit. She appeared uninjured. Two boys about ten years old were laying on the ground closer to the dock. They were not moving. My husband headed toward them with an out of town emergency room physician visiting the lake on vacation. I walked toward the moored boat. In the middle of the boat, on the floor, I saw the body of a young woman with a bloody stump where her right arm should have been. A man gently placed a piece of tarp over her. The dancing waves of earlier now appeared cruel, showing no respect for the woman on board, as they relentlessly jostled the boat. Overwhelmed by the sight, I turned away.

Soon after, I became aware of more people gathering including divers with scuba equipment. The sounds of horns blaring and people yelling filled the air. Wailing sirens signaled that ambulances were approaching. Engine sounds from motor boats that earlier were calming now intruded on this tragic scene. Smells of motor oil, sweat and seaweed filled the air. My senses, which had delighted me earlier, now tortured me.

As the scuba divers prepared their tanks to enter the water, I asked for details about the accident. They said the motorboat tied to the dock had eight people aboard, two families, each with a father, mother, daughter and son. It was traveling across the lake when another

motorboat was seen moving with excessive speed at a right angle toward it. The speeding boat hydroplaned and crossed in the air over the middle of the first boat. The blades of the motor had struck at least four of the passengers who had been sitting in the middle of the boat, the mothers and sons. The fathers had been sitting in the front of the boat and the daughters in the back. Seven of the passengers had been accounted for and they were diving for the eighth, one of the mothers.

Panic seized me as I tried to figure out what I could do, what I should do. I was having difficulty thinking clearly and tried to reverse the mental paralysis the emotions of futility, anger, disbelief and sadness created. Feeling both helpless and the pressure to do something productive, I realized that all the medical training and experience I had did not prepare for me for this.

I struggled to find something to do that would help, anything that would make me think, not feel. Then, a woman in her sixties approached me and said one of the girls on the boat had been taken across the street to her yard. She asked if I could come over and take a look at her. Crossing the road, I noticed a girl stretched out on the front lawn. Her eyes were open and staring at the sky. She wore a green tank top and navy blue shorts. As I approached, she turned to look at me but maintained an expressionless face. Her eyes seemed to say what she must have been feeling. I knelt on the ground beside her and asked her name.

“Katie,” she replied.

“What a pretty name – how old are you?” I asked.

“Thirteen.”

“Do you hurt anywhere?”

“No.”

She remained quiet as I examined her. I asked if I could lift her shirt to check her belly and she nodded yes. Underneath I found a fresh horizontal laceration about 8 inches long across the middle of her abdomen. It was a few millimeters deep and not bleeding. She did not indicate that she knew it was there and neither did I. After gently replacing her shirt, I just held her hand quietly until the ambulance had arrived. No further conversation took place but in the silence I could feel her fear and confusion.

After she was moved to an ambulance, I went to help my husband and the ER physician who were caring for the boys. Both boys were in critical condition. The prognosis was poor. The boy with apparent head trauma was to be sent via helicopter 30 miles to a hospital with neurological services. The other was to be transported via ambulance to a hospital 10 miles away. My husband chose to go with the first boy and I went with the other. As I rode in the back of the ambulance to the hospital, I forced myself to focus on the clinical status of the boy in an effort to avoid thinking about the circumstances that brought us together. I accompanied the litter through the short corridor to the emergency room, knowing that he would never walk out of the hospital. A few hours later, the late night news reported that both boys had died and the body of the second mother had been recovered.

The front page of the newspaper the next day gave a detailed account of the accident. The families had come to the lake for ice cream and a boat ride to celebrate a victory earlier in the day of the boys' baseball team. Four people dead and two families shattered.

Almost twenty-five years have passed since that Saturday in June. It is said that experience is the greatest teacher. The lessons I learned could never be taught in a classroom or a clinical setting. I saw how strangers banded together to help. I developed a new respect for paramedic and ambulance crews as I saw the challenges they deal with regularly. I learned that sometimes just holding a hand is the best thing you can do for both yourself and the patient. My awareness of how fragile and transient life can be was increased. I saw that even though I had experience, my limitations as a human being were the most restrictive. I discovered that the emotional impact of a critical situation could impede efforts. I realized that I have to actively compartmentalize my emotions in order to be effective and then deal with those emotions after the crisis has passed.

Life consists of events that serve as defining moments. Despite the passage of time, I continue to learn from this experience that took place when I was young and early in my career. This is because it is the point where one is in their personal and professional life when an event occurs that determines its impact not the actual event itself. This is perhaps the most important lesson that I am still trying to understand.

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