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The Translation of Memory

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I am writing this on the one-year anniversary of my grandmother's passing.

When I began my clinical rotations as a medical student six months ago, I saw her everywhere. I saw her in the faces of women who looked nothing like her, but spoke Spanish with a familiar vivacity and conviction. I saw her in patients, young or old, diagnosed with the same cancer that selfishly consumed her. I saw her in every grandmother accompanying her grandchild to the pediatrician.

When will this stop? How do I prevent this raw, unhealing wound, a wound I have spent months so clumsily suturing, from re-opening time and time again? Just when I would begin to sense solid ground forming beneath me, my stomach would twist on itself, the acuity of remembrance flooding my system faster than a shot of epinephrine, depriving me of oxygen and leaving me gasping for air; my flimsy, now damp surgical mask the only visible marker of pain; so silent, so shamed.

One summer day, when I was rotating through a healthcare clinic in the Lower East Side of New York, I met Evelyn¹. At a remarkable 94 years old, Evelyn was outrageously alive, and is to this day. Born to an immigrant mother from Austria

and a U.S.-born father, she has called New York City home since the day she developed a mind audacious enough to get her into mischief. Nearly a century later, the Lower East Side remains her beloved home, even now, in the temporary residence of a skilled nursing facility. Due to a host of unwieldy medical conditions, Evelyn finds herself with an increasingly undependable body despite the stubborn objections of her exceedingly independent mind.



From the minute we first met, Evelyn indulged me with adventurous and provocative stories, from her tales as a rebellious young child window shopping in Chinatown, to her stint working for the 1950 Census, to her proudest moments conducting research in the lab run by George Papanicolaou, the physician-scientist who invented the Pap smear. Besides a few bed-bound friends, Evelyn is on her own. She never had children and her partner and siblings passed decades ago. Her contagious optimism and witty humor are rivaled only by a growing loneliness and anxious despair about the state of the world.

Not long after our first meeting, Evelyn was hospitalized. Though she survived a risky surgery, I was struck with a harrowing realization. Had she passed, I might have been one of the only human beings she shared her life stories with at the end. I began carrying the weight of this realization around with me in the hospital and with every sick and dying patient I cared for.



How is memory preserved when there is seemingly no one left to preserve it for us? We might have photographs and mementos, no doubt powerful physical objects that aid in remembering, but is memory something to be confined to a book we dust off from time to time? Or is it a living and breathing entity within us?

I am reminded of the words of Oliver Sacks, the late neurologist whose philosophical meditations in “The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat” I recently re-visited in light of my experiences in the hospital:

Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us — through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives — we are each of us unique. (Sacks, 1998, p. 105)



Much in parallel with Dr. Sacks' worldview, the only way I could seem to make sense of memory—of how we remember our loved ones and the strangers we hardly knew—was by understanding memory as something that is translated through and in others. With multiple generations between us and many stories later, I came to appreciate the psychological and emotional depth of this in my relationship with Evelyn.



Evelyn had the ability to bring to life the spirit of my grandmother, evoking memories I previously thought too painful to share. In turn, I was the vessel through which Evelyn revisited the nostalgia of her youth, honoring a life she thought she

had parted ways with amidst the threatening tides of her illness. In seeing my grandmother in the faces of so many of my patients, I came to understand this was not the theft of grief, but the poignant presentation of shared humanity.

Experiencing memory through others is fundamentally possible because of our connectedness. Doctor-patient relationships are no different. It is because of, rather than in spite of, the gravity of my grandmother's presence that I am unequivocally a more patient-centric listener and empathic caretaker.

Historically, western medical culture has argued for the segregation of the personal and the professional, so much so that the essence of our beings—our emotions, language, dress—are subject to regulation to ensure the preservation of this distinction. But how can we expect our patients to venture into deeper and darker waters for us if we are unable to do so ourselves? Boundaries are essential, but vulnerability is not in and of itself about what we share or how much we share; it is about how we move through the world and occupy space in it. It is about how we confront our own mortality in order to be present in our patient's mortality. It is about how we say "I don't know" because that is the truth.

My grief is still there, just as much as it was at the start of this year. I don't expect it to go anywhere anytime soon, nor do I want it to. This past week, my team empowered me to lead my first goals of care conversation with a patient suffering deeply from terminal cancer. I cried with the family, as the flood of memory—of my grandmother,

of my patient, of Evelyn, of so many human lives long-lived and not yet lived—submerged me.

For once, I let it, realizing it was possible to breathe underwater.

Note

1. The subject's name has been changed for privacy. All photographs were lovingly captured with the consent of the subject.

Reference

Sacks, O. (1998). *The man who mistook his wife for a hat*. Suffolk, UK: Richard Clay Ltd.

About The Author

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