
NONFICTION | SPRING 2020

Karma, Love, Air

By Ariel Scott

They stopped allowing visitors in the hospital 3 days ago. The charge nurse walked into the room and slid a piece of paper with red lettering across the workroom's table in front of us. *To protect our patients and staff, we will not be allowing visitors in our hospital. Exceptions may be allowed in the following special circumstances.* We already believed everything happening around the world—China, Italy, New York. Not because of the media. But because our colleagues—our friends—thousands of miles away would send us texts detailing how they were afraid to inhale when hunching over patients in an effort to listen to their lungs on morning rounds. Or how they scrubbed their face with soap and water in the provider bathroom until it was red and chafed when a patient coughed on them right after their unit ran out of face shields and PPE.

The notice lay on the table in front of myself, a 2nd year senior resident, two interns, and the pharmacist who shared our workroom. The artificial hum of the air conditioner was the only audible sound as many of us read through the notice. We chewed on the corner of our lip with the realization that this ominous force was finally here and about to affect our patients and us. A solid minute passed before one of the interns grasped the piece of paper in their hand and glanced up at the charge nurse.

“How can we get this translated in a culturally appropriate way for our Spanish and Vietnamese populations?”

My gray boots clank against the scuffed tile of the halls as I head towards the inpatient team room. Even though it is the largest hospital in the state, it resembles, at present, a ghost town. With the lack of people around, I start to think how fitting it would be for tumbleweed to roll by in this moment. All non-essential personnel have been asked to work from home. Other essential ones have been forced to call in sick because there's no one to watch their children who no longer have an open school or daycare.

As I make my way into the inpatient workroom at the far end of the unit, I notice a singular box of surgical face masks and Clorox wipes crowd the table where we used to place a communal bowl of fresh fruit and carbohydrate-laden bagels for the residents.

The resident awaiting the end of their night shift slouches down in a chair, elbows resting on the cushioned arms and hands tucked in the pockets of their jacket as dark circles hang like a crescent moon under their eyes. Their gaze finds a clock among the cluttered posters of cardiac

arrest algorithms and inpatient educational resources, watching it seemingly frozen just 15 minutes shy of the 7 o'clock hour when the daytime resident would arrive.

“Why are you here so early?”

“Didn't want to miss the sunrise today.”

It's not quite the truth. I had woken up early and couldn't go back to sleep. How many cases of COVID-19 in our area today? How many admissions overnight? Who will take care of my dog when I get called in for back-up in the coming weeks? Is that sting in the back of my throat my inevitable March allergies or the start of something more ominous?

“Was it perfect? The sunrise?”

My eyebrows furrow as I take my seat at the table and sip my coffee, contemplating the use of the word perfect to describe anything in the world right now.

“Well, I got distracted—there were no cars on the streets, and it was eerie and weird, so I didn't really pay attention when it happened. But the sky was that watermelon sort of pink over the crest, and there were yellows and pinks and fading purples just before—I'm sure it was beautiful.”

They nod, glancing away and falling silent. And I immediately regret missing that sunrise. Sharing with this resident that beautiful moments are still possible and happening all around us was perhaps even more important than witnessing it for myself.

“Think we're all going to get this virus?”

My eyes dart up to take in the reserved, contemplative look on their face. There's a slight tightening of the lines around their eyes, jaw clenched as though preparing for confirmation of the worst, as their foot taps in rapid succession against the stain on the carpeted floor where I dropped my coffee last week. After 6 years as a doctor, I recognize emotional affect quite well. And their affect tells of unease, anxiety, and fear.

“I'm more curious to know what you think.”

A tired smile grows on their lips as they roll their eyes.

“Always the teacher.”

I smile at them, waiting patiently for them to continue.

“I hope this isn’t too morbid, but I kind of expect most of us to get it. All the reports, the media, hearing from friends across the country, and the lack of PPE everywhere in the world. There’s already community spread here and chances are, we’ve already been exposed in the hospital. How scary is that?”

I’m slow to respond, tossing my head back and forth in contemplation of what to say. “There’s a lot of scary things in the world. Lots of fear because of it. I have my own. Fear of being an asymptomatic carrier. Fear that I’ve already spread it to patients who can’t handle it. I’m even afraid to see my family because I’m at much higher risk and don’t want to be the reason they get it.”

My vulnerability hangs heavy between us, and I now fear I have said too much. Been too human to this resident who was perhaps not ready to embrace it. But that same tired smile finds its way across their face once more as they exhale.

“Same. I think I feel exactly the same. It’s absolutely exhausting and all I think about when I go home and when I wake up to come back here.”

A sound escapes them, but it’s indistinguishable whether it’s a humorless chuckle or a sigh of defeat. The mental anguish of what they are carrying—what all healthcare providers will carry through this pandemic and beyond remains indescribable. I sip my coffee in silence across from them before speaking. “You know how people keep saying this is mother nature’s way of rebalancing life and population control or some cosmic Karma for the rainforests and global warming? I don’t think it’s any of those things. I think it’s a different way of restoring balance to humanity.”

They look at me with eyebrows raised, nervous expression still on their face. “Like survival of the fittest?”

“No, no. More like the world had a bit too much hate and selfishness before this happened, and this awful thing will likely get worse before it gets better, but somehow, it’ll help us realize we need a lot more love and compassion.”

They glance away while I speak, eyes narrowing in evident skepticism as a sly smile spreads across their face. There’s a shuffle of feet against tile and voices of boisterous residents on the

day shift barreling into the room. The resident tightens their jaw, a huff escaping them as they finish their last thought.

“Hope isn’t hard science though, and the hard science we have says this isn’t going to end well.”

My mouth parts but words don’t escape in time as I watch them turn around in their chair to greet the residents coming on for the day team. I feel unsettled by my pause and lack of response, turning back to my computer to peruse the labs, mind challenged by that incomplete moment and the acceptance that, yes, medicine celebrates realism and pragmatism and evidence-based science. But life is more than science and realism and things we can see, feel, and touch. And hope is like air—invisible and all too easily polluted, yet vital to sustaining life.

I take another sip of my coffee, eyes studying the resident physicians who go about the business of a morning sign out in a more noticeably mellow fashion than is typical of them. My heart clenches at the thought that one of them will fall ill or suffer significant emotional trauma in the battle yet to come as the pandemic soars to higher numbers in our own community. Its inevitability hangs heavy upon us all as we absorb news reports of healthcare providers in panic-stricken conditions, collapsing economies, and unprotected due to the lack of sufficient PPE. But a sudden collective bellow of laughter shakes me free of the those creeping thoughts as I glance up to see them in good spirits over something one of them has said. And as I soak in the warmth, hope, comradery, and love they have for each other, I marvel at this moment of beauty and resilience peaking over the top of the dark and looming clouds of fear all around us, and it’s like getting to see the sun rise after all.

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