

Schmeckle Down

By Kenneth Weinberg

It was the week of the High Holy Days.

Not being an observant Jew, I found myself working both the Rosh Hashanah, and now, Yom Kippur, shifts in the Urgent Care where I've been employed for several years.

The day was unfolding in a most unrighteous manner. Unlike a religiously ordained "Day of Atonement," spent among fellow congregants, with services led by a rabbi, where I could ruminate on, and try to expiate, my sins, it had become instead a day of personal atonement, and regret, for my showing up to work at all on a Jewish holiday.

I was the only physician at the site and I had only one assistant to help deal with the overwhelming number of incoming patients. Plus, we'd walked in to find there were inadequate medical supplies and no radiology technician to take any needed X-rays.

Adding to my regret was the realization early in the shift that, despite multiple phone calls, emails and texts from me to the Powers That Be about our dire, and dangerous, situation, no help would be forthcoming. I was feeling a deep sense of abandonment, of being thrown to the wolves on this holiest of days.

"What a fool I was, to decide to labor on Yom Kippur," I mused. "Perhaps someone is trying to tell me something.

Though I strongly self-identify as Jewish, I long ago realized the rituals in shul during the High Holy Days—rituals that for many are a reflective, cleansing experience—only leave me flat. When I'd submitted my schedule requests the prior month I hadn't given a thought about working on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, hadn't even realized what dates they were.

Now, as the nightmare of the day, toiling on The Yom (as some people call it) unfolded, I was kicking myself, becoming more and more angered. Prescriptions weren't going through to the pharmacies, patients were sicker, nastier, and, more demanding than usual.

I realized I was at least partly to blame though, as I'd foolishly assumed when I walked in to start the 8 AM to 8 PM shift that day, it would be relatively slow. I'd expected that the largely Jewish population on the Upper West Side of Manhattan (where the Urgent Care is located) would be more focused on synagogue than sickness. Instead, we were exceptionally busy, nearly out of control.

By 7 PM I was raw, drained, having problems being my usual caring, even jovial, self. I was desperate for the shift to end. Fortunately there was a lull at that moment, and I walked to the

back of the facility, in hopes of catching up on my charting so I could bolt out the door on time at 8.

I was sitting in front of my computer, clicking nimbly as I signed off on my charts, when I became aware of a new patient registering at the front desk. As I listened to the sound of his voice, and heard what I sensed was the self-induced desperation of his circumstances, I was primed for aggravation when I walked in to see him.

I trudged into the room and found him sitting casually on the examining table. His tattered shirt was partly open to reveal a mass of mangled, soiled tape and gauze dressings, hanging off the left side of his chest and abdomen. He was a wizened, scruffy, little bald-haired man, of indeterminate age—though from his chart I quickly discovered he was in his mid-sixties.

He told me he was half Irish Catholic, half Jewish and lived deep in Brooklyn. As I stepped closer to him, he began revealing his story, explaining why he had felt forced to come all the way to our Urgent Care, and informing me about his recent surgery to remove a testicular tumor. He bemoaned the episodic, inadequate treatment he'd had since the procedure due to his being on Medicaid, and, his recent inability to get the right supplies to cover the wounds he'd incurred after a complicated operation gone wrong.

His saga and the obvious inequities he'd suffered only added to my annoyance and frustration, an annoyance that was growing (and showing) as he disrobed entirely to reveal a surgical scar that extended from scrotum to nipple, taking up much of the left side of his groin and abdomen. At that point I began to get an actual sense of what he'd been going through, and I also realized that properly caring for that wound was going to take me way past our 8 PM official closing time.

Always the professional though, I began formulating a plan for what had to be done. And as I pondered the situation I found that, in spite of myself, I was starting to warm to him.

He watched me as I inspected his extensive cicatrix, and as I turned towards a cabinet to get the supplies I'd need, he asked:

“How does it look, doc?”

“It could be a lot worse,” I allowed.

“Have you read any Shakespeare? *Romeo and Juliet*?”

“Yes,” I said, though I couldn't at that moment recall when.

“Do you remember the dialogue between Mercutio and Romeo after Mercutio's been stabbed?”

I had to admit I didn't.

So he proceeded to recite it to me.

Verbatim, and with a near perfect pitch English accent.

Romeo: Courage, man; the hurt cannot be much.

Mercutio: No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man.

With that he had me. At that moment he could have asked me for anything and it would have been his. I hunkered down, assiduously cleaning the dirt from his wound and then, even though we had none of the large, yellow gauze dressings he needed, I began covering, in a most patchwork quilt manner, his reddened, raw scar, from deformed scrotum, past contorted umbilicus and up to mangled left nipple, with our own tiny, oily pads. As I toiled he soliloquized about his gigs as a standup comic, about his unorthodox religious and cultural upbringing, about his maniacal hatred for Trump...

And ironically, listening to him talk as I performed one of the things most proscribed on this holiest of days, washing him, and, feeling us bond while I scrupulously cared for the wounds, it was as if I was being given the chance to wash away my own transgressions from the past year.

At one point, far into these ministrations, I had to lift up his post-surgical penis to clean what was left of the scrotum, then to cover it with gauze. I needed his assistance when I completed that task.

“Schmeckle down,” I requested.

He complied and, rearranging himself, his remaining testicle, and his schmeckle, he began riffing on what the down from a schmeckle (compared to say, goose down) would actually be like. I’m not sure I can repeat, nor would care to, the imagery he evoked as I continued the process of covering and then taping down his dressings. I will say though, that by the time I was done, having placed countless lubricated gauze squares over the left side of his groin and torso, covered them with dry dressings, and then secured them in place with yards and yards of tape, I found myself transformed. I vowed to go home and reread *Romeo and Juliet* and I left work that night feeling refreshed, uplifted and absolved.

As I walked home I realized it was my own perfect Yom Kippur.

Kenneth Weinberg is a many, many year ER and Urgent Care doctor, registered Cannabis MD, and health activist. More details about his work can be found at www.CDONY.com

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