The Importance of Assigning Meaning to Life’s Events

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The issue of assigning meaning to life events was first raised by one of my teachers. He was a psychiatrist and the course director for that discipline. I met him during my second year of medical school. He was a captivating lecturer. After sitting through countless hours and what seemed to be an endless array of basic science courses, it was refreshing to be able to attend to an instructor without much effort. He was that type of a speaker.

During one of our many discussions about psychiatry, in which I wanted to resist an internal curiosity and urge to become one, he taught the most valuable lesson I know today. He said, “Psychiatry is not just about giving pills; it’s about the meaning our patients give to events in their lives.” That important meeting gave me the momentum to make the decision to become a psychiatrist. During my training and throughout my career, I have experienced the pain of dealing with difficult and challenging patients, sometimes very late at night, often in the 30th hour of duty while on call. During these incidents, I confess that occasionally I have cursed my medical school mentor, but, by and large, I have a sense of deep gratitude toward him for leading me to a career path that I love and respect.

The importance of assigning meaning to life events is not new. Viktor Frankl, MD, a survivor of the Holocaust, in his book, Man’s Search for Meaning, describes his endurance in Nazi concentra-
and also happened to speak fluent Spanish. Many of female students were keen about him and always in his vicinity.

By then, I had firmly decided that I wanted to go to medical school, but more so, I wanted to be like Paul. He was a good role model and he inspired me. He had the plane was hijacked by terrorists and was deliberately crashed into the Pentagon.

When I was reading the alumni magazine, it had been quite a few years since that event took place, but I had still avoided thinking about Paul’s death. But that night, in a moment of procrastination, when I looked through a magazine I usually never thumb through, I stopped on a page with his name on it. That night, I stopped for several hours. I stopped opening my mail. I stopped looking at the bills and working on my to-do list. My chores could wait. My mind became preoccupied with Paul.

I looked online to read more about what had happened since Paul’s death. Through funding, Paul’s parents started several different funds, scholarships, and programs in Paul’s name. I also learned that Paul had become very interested in campaigning to battle adolescent obesity, and this was the focus of his academic work at Harvard. Coincidently, he was on that American Airlines flight to attend an American Medical Association (AMA) conference in Los Angeles on this subject. He was active in the AMA’s policy-making process to improve healthcare in our country, and, at 32 years, he was a senior clinical advisor with the office of the Surgeon General. His accomplishments did not surprise me.

I thought about Paul more and continued searching. I discovered a website memorial created in his name. It noted that he had gotten engaged a few weeks before he died. His dreams of marrying his fiancée and forming a family were shattered by men that walked less than 15 feet behind him through the security gates at Dulles Airport. I was deeply saddened and filled with sorrow at that moment. Paul was robbed of his dreams. What purpose did his unexpected death serve? What meaning can such injustice hold?

In the June 2009 issue of The Atlantic, Mr. Shank wrote an article titled: “What makes us happy?” in which he interviews George Vaillant, MD, the director for the
Harvard study that followed 268 men who entered college in the late 1930s in one of the most comprehensive longitudinal studies. Vaillant talks about how these men go through transformations as they age and experience different stages of their lives. I sensed I was in midst of one of these “transformations” but was more melancholy and sad than happy.5

Then I went upstairs. My wife had fallen asleep attempting to watch a cooking show on TV. I went to the kids’ room and looked at them for a long while. Remembering Paul brought tears to my eyes and a deep sense of sorrow and loss. I was avoiding these feelings, just carrying on with daily tasks of life. After some thought, the resolution came: His death made me recognize that worrying and planning about tomorrow is never worth losing a moment today. Tomorrow, you may be on a plane, in a train, a car, or in a building, unknowingly moments from death, but you have today. You have now. Sometimes it seems hard, but you have to make an effort to forget your troubles, remind yourself of your good fortune, and be grateful for what you have. You can’t control tomorrow, but today is yours.

At that moment, I realized that even though Paul’s death was utterly unfair and that nothing can justify such injustice, his death cannot be without meaning. It is my responsibility to give it meaning. It was time to stop avoiding memories of Paul and make sense of this seemingly senseless loss. Through remembering his life and death, Paul helped me gain insight. This insight is to be joyous and thankful for all my blessings.

CONCLUSION

Physicians, regardless of discipline or specialty, deal with human suffering and pain in one way, shape, or form. By understanding events that have caused suffering and loss in our own lives and giving them “meaning” through reflection and personal beliefs, we can only become better instruments in healing our patients, our fellow human beings who come to us for help.

I miss Paul. I wish he was alive. He inspired me to be better by just being around him. I have a feeling that somewhere, Paul is looking down on me, content and smiling, knowing that once again, he has made me a better man, and a better psychiatrist for it.

REFERENCES