



Associate Director's Column

“Music Can Heal the Wounds that Medicine Cannot Touch” -Debasish Mridha

By Cassie C. Ferguson, MD

*aren't your
eyelids tired
of keeping prisoners?
those tears
are precious minerals.
lap them up
like a medicine;
it's called healing.*

-@blackliturgies

I wasn't sure what I'd feel. More accurately, I have been blunted for so many months that I hadn't given any thought to what I might feel. Yet within a nanosecond of him taking the stage, within the time it took for the light to recede from the crowd and for the first wave of sound to hit my consciousness, I began to cry and could not stop.

It wasn't only that Elton John, an incredible humanist and legendary artist was taking the stage in Milwaukee for the very last time. It wasn't only that at 75-years-old, he is the same age as my parents whom I cherish and fear losing more and more every day. It wasn't only that I was within six feet of at least eight strangers without a mask and was inexplicably not in terror but overjoyed. And it wasn't only that I sang *Rocket Man* with 18,000 other people at the top of my voice, uncaring that I have no talent for singing.

It was all of that. It was the realization of all of that washing over me again and again and again. It was the physical feeling of my heart opening and beginning to soften. It was noticing the hope I'd been harboring frozen in my heart for two years finally thawing.

“We need to be more careful with each other.” Bernice King

To be clear, I've cried countless numbers of times since this pandemic began—out of anger, frustration, sadness, desperation, fear, hopelessness, exhaustion. But it has always felt futile. When I cried in those very first moments after Elton John took the stage, it suddenly felt like it was finally releasing me from the pain of the last two years—from the pain I've witnessed as a mother, as a physician, and as a human.

The last two years have damaged us—in known ways and in ways yet to be known. This damage was inescapable. But I am more hopeful now that “we can be mended”; and I am hopeful that we can mend each other. (Veronica Roth) Standing in our way, I fear, is that in the isolated spaces we have been forced to live, we have been so encouraged to care for self that we have allowed the muscles of caring for one another to atrophy a bit. As Bernice King tweeted following the violence at the Oscars last week, “I just think we really need to be more careful with each other. We handle each other so violently...verbally, physically, psychologically.” I can't help but wonder whether in the absence of one another, we have grown away from the communities that keep us rooted in love and empathy.

“When the well is dry, we know the worth of water.” Benjamin Franklin

At the same time, I know that many of you feel as if the last two years demanded that you give everything you had; that you have risked your own life, and even the lives of your families, to care for others again and again. And perhaps you feel as if those sacrifices were summarily forgotten, that you were wrung out and tossed aside. This too will make it hard to again love each other with our whole heart; to stitch our communities back together again.

And yet, I don't believe that these are insurmountable obstacles. Particularly when I remember that in the darkest moments of the last two years, it was the small acts of kindness that saved me—those seemingly insignificant acts that would normally blend in with the background of everyday life, but that stood out against the backdrop of a pandemic. A walk in the cold and dark of early morning with a best friend, a \$5 Starbucks gift card from a student worried about how I was doing, the gold balloons brought by friends to make an impromptu birthday party feel like another year was something to celebrate.

“To see things in a seed. That is genius.” Lao Tzu

These acts take on such meaning because their disproportionate impact takes us by surprise (last week I sobbed in my car after a mom running the PTO bake sale, who knows I am a physician, said to me “Thank you so much for your service over the last two years.”) These acts make us feel instantly seen; they make us feel that we matter.

I believe that this is as true in the learning environment as it is in our lives outside of the classroom and clinic—perhaps even more so. I have heard from many medical students that the simple act of a preceptor remembering their name transformed their experience on a clerkship.

Remembering their name.

Acknowledging the power of small acts, I would also assert that we can do better than the common courtesy of remembering the names of the learners we are charged with educating. I recall very clearly being a brand-new third-year medical student on the Trauma Surgery service. My one job in the trauma bay was to obtain a social history from the patient, and I was terrified. The attending emergency medicine physician, who stood next to me supervising the team, leaned over as we wrapped up our care and said, “You seem very comfortable in this environment. Have you thought about emergency medicine?” That attending was Dr. Steven Hargarten, the former chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine, and I know that this moment influenced how I thought about my role on the health care team and my choice to pursue pediatric emergency medicine.

As the world opens up, and we look for ways to heal ourselves and to mend one another, I would suggest we begin by tending to those around us as we have tended to our sourdough starters or the new houseplants we’ve accumulated over the past two years—gently, carefully, and with the curiosity inherent in discovery. Similarly, I would encourage all of us to ask ourselves how we might care for our learners such that they are inspired and empowered to flourish and become the very best versions of themselves.

Catherine (Cassie) Ferguson, MD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Pediatrics (Emergency Medicine) at MCW. She is the Associate Director of the Robert D. and Patricia E. Kern Institute for the Transformation of Medical Education.