

# MIND TO MIND

*Creative writing that explores the abstract side  
of our profession and our lives*

*Carol Wiley Cassella, M.D., Editor*

## Charmed, I'm Sure

Gregory L. Rose, M.D.\*

MAY Stewart was already in her sixties when I was born. She and her husband, Fred, lived along Big Catt Creek about five miles from my grandparents' farm. Fred drove a school bus, which is always a good job for a farmer in need of more income (you only work mornings, afternoons, and are off all summer). Fred and May raised tobacco, had a few beef cattle, sold vegetables in the summertime, and even had a single gasoline pump in front of their house to sell gas. The pump was one of the *very* old-fashioned types where one had to pump the fuel by hand from a ground tank to a large ten gallon glass jug at the top of the pump. Then gravity fed the gas into your truck or gas can. I remember watching May do this and thought, "Why don't they get a new one?" not understanding the cost of things and need for electricity for a more modern pump.

As it turns out, May was the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. I came to realize the significance of this fact when my younger brother had thrush when he was an infant. In Eastern Kentucky, along with the rest of Appalachia and in the countries from which those who settled the area came, namely England, Scotland, and Ireland, being a same-sexed seventh child of a seventh child imparted that individual with certain "powers." Chief among these powers was the ability to heal. Healing, in this case, did not mean curing systemic disease or serious injury. These gifted people had the ability to charm off warts, cure thrush, and the like.

I was a wide-eyed four-year-old at the time, and I definitely wanted to see May Stewart cure my brother of thrush. His oropharynx was so bad he was unable to feed. My grandmother, mother, baby

\* University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky. glrose0@email.uky.edu

Accepted for publication April 22, 2011.

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brother, a curious aunt and I drove down to the Stewart place, and parked by the gas pump. We climbed up the steep steps up to the front porch. May was waiting for us. She took my brother in her arms and huffed three times into his open mouth. That was it; no incantations or amulets, no poultices or root tea.

Incredibly, after a half hour or so, my infant brother was able to take a bottle. He never had a problem with candidiasis again.

A few years later, when I was seven, I developed several flat, wide warts on my left knee. My mother used Compound W on the area for a couple of weeks, but all it did was burn for several minutes with each application. My grandfather told us of a man nearby who was a seventh son of a seventh son. Mr. Collins was his name, and he was known for his wart-eradicating prowess.

My father and mother took me to see Mr. Collins. He was an amiable old man. He rubbed my warts with his fingers and gave me a kitchen match to keep as part of the cure, which my mother put in her purse for safe keeping. Mr. Collins said it would take a couple of weeks for the warts to leave. After a month, the warts showed no change.

Soon after this, my uncle, who has always been a jovial type (but definitely not a seventh son of a seventh son), announced at Sunday dinner that *he* would charm away my warts. He rubbed his fingers on my knee, mumbled “Abracadabra” or its equivalent, and predicted the warts would be gone in a month’s time. Sure enough, the warts had vanished by the end of the allotted time.

I have not heard any reports of my uncle repeating his success as a dermatologist since. But at the time, I was very grateful, because I feared going to our family doctor to get the warts “burned off with an electric needle.” I am unable to say if there was a placebo effect by the power of suggestion, that I believed my uncle could successfully rid me of warts, or if warts had run their natural course. I strongly suspect, however, that the warts would have gone away soon enough without Mr. Collins or my uncle and their supposed charming ability.

The amazing thing though, is how was an elderly woman able to rid my baby brother of oral candidiasis by blowing in his mouth? There was certainly no power of suggestion regarding my brother. Did May Stewart, by blowing in his mouth, reintroduce normal oral flora? If so, would it work so quickly?

Many of the people mentioned in this story are gone now; the Stewarts, my grandparents, my aunt, Mr. Collins. As well, many of the beliefs and folklore of Appalachia are gone. Fortunately, social

historians and anthropologists recorded much of the culture before it was gone.

What I have never thought about until recently is if the healing abilities of an elderly seventh daughter of a seventh daughter had any influence on my choice to pursue a medical career. I am but a first son of a first son, yet I feel at least somewhat successful as a physician. I'll bet May Stewart would have been one heck of a doctor.