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Post Something-or-other Syndrome

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Gayle joined the anesthesiology department as a first-year resident and then stayed on as an attending. As colleagues we were friendly, but we never became after-work friends. After several years she left for the greener pastures of private practice, and we lost all contact.

I continued to work for another decade or so before retiring. One day we unexpectedly found ourselves exchanging messages on Facebook, eventually agreeing it would be fun to get together.

I became increasingly unsettled as the agreed-upon date approached. Retirement had taught me that my relationships with the people I used to work with often changed in unpredictable ways. In spite of all the solemn promises made, most of my fellow workers had simply faded out of my life. One of the unique benefits of anesthesiology was forming very special friendships; I bet most people don't have a friend who has seen you in trouble, rushed into the OR, helped you save your patient's life, and then walked away casually, saying only, "Don't forget you owe me a late call." Disappointingly, many of these friendships evaporated upon the realization that without the common bond of work, there was nothing else to keep us together. More cheerfully, I'd also learned that sometimes it's a whole lot easier being friends with people when you didn't have to work with them.

When I did eventually meet Gayle one afternoon at a trendy bar in the business district, there was some initial awkwardness as we stumbled for

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words to break the ice. She too had retired and once we started talking about how much we were both enjoying retirement, the conversation began to flow easily. Inevitably, the discussion drifted to gossiping about the people we had worked with and we laughed aloud as we took turns trying to outdo each other with the funniest OR story: “Remember the time....”

Running out of stories, the conversation drifted into more serious territory: the departmental politics of call schedules, salaries, case assignments, vacations and the thousand other issues that once were so important to us. We continued to smile while talking but they were painful smiles, because as in every department these issues had generated many unpleasant debates, misunderstandings, and outright ugly conversations and some of the unpleasantness still lingered after all these years.

Realizing this was turning into something more than the lighthearted reunion we promised each other, we then turned to issues about anesthesiology itself: the stress that even “routine” cases had often caused us; the insanity of making continuous instantaneous decisions, any one of which could be second-guessed forever; trying to survive those sleepless twenty-four hour calls where we all knew the primary goal was to simply survive, with everything else being of secondary importance; having to live in fear of the lawyers—who don’t know the difference between an epidural and a spinal—waiting to make money by publicly humiliating us in endless Kafkaesque proceedings; and even now the many sleepless nights as we tried unsuccessfully to put these issues behind us.

The bar began to empty out as the men and women in business suits reluctantly decided it was time to go home for dinner. Following their lead, I stood up and began to put my coat on but I felt her hand grabbing mine, pulling me back down, as she whispered, “please...we’re not done,” while signaling to the bored bartender that he should refresh our wine glasses.

She then began staring off into space, with a poker face revealing no emotion as she began discussing the darkest secrets, the ones we tried to hide from the world and from ourselves: namely the cases that had gone horribly wrong, because of the mistakes we ourselves had committed. We agreed that if you give people enough chances to make mistakes—put them under enough pressure for long enough periods of time—they will “screw up.” Not the most elegant phrase but we were way beyond hiding behind euphemisms such as “therapeutic misadventures.” Over the years they had given us more than enough chances and there were times when we failed. We agreed it’s really that simple. That doesn’t make us evil or incompetent, just human. Up until now we had repressed the memories so that we could remain sane but now we finally had a chance to come clean and acknowledge our sins, the way you can only do in the presence of another sinner. We shared the endless ache in our souls caused by going through life knowing your errors have cost someone else dearly, someone who entrusted their life to you.

The bartender noisily put away the last of the glasses and stared in our direction, making it clear he was done for the day. Emotionally exhausted we found it impossible to make small talk as we settled the tab, so we silently hugged each other and went our separate ways.

It took me the entire train ride home—I can be a bit slow about these things—but eventually I realized what had happened. The word is catharsis: the process of releasing powerful, suppressed emotions. I'd been unable to have such a discussion with my other anesthesiology friends because we had always prided ourselves on our mental toughness; showing emotions was a sign of weakness. Family and other friends were of no use; I was never able to convey to them how deeply these problems affected me.

It had taken someone I had not seen in years, but I had been given a chance to ventilate, to open up to someone who had gone through similar experiences, someone who had been experiencing the same doubts and insecurities, someone who had been wrestling with the same demons as me.

Someone who made me realize I may be a bit traumatized, but that I am not crazy.

THE END