REFLECTIONS

Running Home

For me, recovery from hepatitis meant rebuilding my beloved energy. I started walking when I was still yellow. Inching around the block in slow deliberate steps, each forward movement was a task of its own. At the end of the block, there was a steep hard incline. Each day I pushed my steps upward until I forced myself over the top. Breathing hard, I would make it over and circle around toward home. I began to look forward to this challenge and the individual steps grew together into a stride. After a time, I could circle the block more than once, pressing over the hill again and again before circling home. When my skin began to turn from sallow to pink, I began to run. As I got stronger I ran one, then two, then three miles each day and never missed a day, until yesterday.

Sunday, August 4, 10:00 P.M. I got ready to go running. My husband, Paul, stopped me on my way out. "Are you sure you feel up to it? Maybe you should wait another day." Without thinking, I ran my hand over my right side, feeling the 2-day-old Band-Aid over the site of my liver biopsy.

"No—I really want to go. I'll go slow."

I started much more slowly than usual. Approaching the hill, I knew I wouldn't make it if I didn't pick up my speed. I sped up and ran as fast as I could toward the top. Pushing up the hill, I could not stop my mind from recounting the events of the past few days. Breathing fast and deep, by the time I reached the top of the hill I was crying and gasping but kept running and running while I thought back to early Friday morning.

Friday, August 2, 5:15 A.M. I went out to start my run. Fast up the hill, I don't remember pushing my way up. I was wondering what was in there—inside me. I had one chance to regenerate these liver cells. What would be there? I was wondering whether the biopsy would hurt, but I tried not to think of that. I decided that I would not complain in any way. I would lie still and not move.

7:30 am. "Put on this gown with the opening to the back. Then, put your clothes in the locker and lie on the bed over here." I followed these instructions while the nurse chatted pleasantly. "Why do you need the biopsy?"

"I had hepatitis and hepatic necrosis."

"When did you have your transplant?"

"I didn't. For the moment, I still have my own liver"

Within a few minutes, Jim came in. He described the cold of betadine, the "bee-sting" of lidocaine, the numbing deeper to the liver capsule, then the biopsy.

"Okay—I'll walk you through it. Breathe deep, breath in—now out—now in—now out and hold it—" I held as still as I could.

STAB. Biopsy number 1.

"One more time. Are you okay?" I shook my head yes. "Breathe deep, breath in—now out—now in—now out and hold it—" I held as still as I could.

STAB. Biopsy number 2. "Are you okay?" I shook my head yes. "Does it hurt?" I shook my head yes. "Do you want something for pain?" I shook my head no. "Sorry that I had to do two but we got really good tissue."

I had to lie on my right side for 2 hours. My right side and shoulder were aching, throbbing, cramping. Eventually, I agreed to take something for pain. Slowly, the pain eased off and was replaced by a tired, sleepy, and nauseous feeling. I closed my eyes and waited for time to pass. Once I could move around, the pain was less but the nausea was more. I got dressed to go.

Paul had insisted on picking me up. I walked to the outside of the hospital and waited for him at the traffic circle. As I waited, I first felt the waves that were so familiar to me from months of emesis. I sat down on the sidewalk.

"Please, Paul, come quickly—" After another minute, I knew I was in trouble and I ran inside to the snack bar and asked them for a bag. I went back outside and sat on the curb, lowered my head over the bag, and vomited. Eventually Paul came and took me home. I clutched my brown bag the entire way.

At home, I vomited again. I knew just what to do. Metal basin by my side, I curled up in bed to anticipate the waves. After months of vomiting from this spot, I knew when it was time to kneel down to the basin to complete the task.

I paged Jim. Before he could answer, the waves were back. I called for Paul, but my 6-year-old daughter answered, "Daddy, Mommy is being sick again." We piled into the car, the entire family and my basin. "Mom, how long are you going to stay at the hospital this time?"

"Only one night."

"That's what you said last time—then you stayed a week." I vomited once more just for emphasis and we continued the journey in silence.

Jim met us at the ER and arranged for the admission.

"I want you to know, Sheri, that this is something that I did to you—with the biopsy. I don't want you to think that there is anything else wrong. It must be a subcapsular hematoma or something. I've been trying to figure it out because it's very unusual to have this much vomiting after a biopsy."

I listened with interest because this entire time, it had never occurred to me to find a reason why this was happening. When I am the doctor, I too spend my energy trying to find reasons why. When I was the patient, I had never wondered why. Nor had I felt that anyone did anything to me. Jim had not made me sick. He had done everything he could do to make it easy for me. I thanked him for all he had done and he left.

Within a few minutes the waves came back again, but now my basin was across the room and so I rang for the nurse.

"How can I help you?"

"I need my nurse. I need a basin—I'm going to be sick."

The nurse entered quickly with a small green emesis basin, the kind I'm sure that no one could really throw up into. By this time I was curled up in position breathing deeply.

"Bigger" was all I could manage to say. She brought me a large yellow basin, the right kind, and I cradled my head in the far corner and hugged the bucket with my arms and waited. When I had finished, she took the bucket and cleaned it out.

"Have you gotten anything for nausea yet?"

"No. Please get something." She came back with 12.5 mg of Phenergan and started to push it into my brand new IV. She was concerned that it would burn as it was going in and told me that she needed to push it slowly. By this time the waves were back and I could not feel anything besides nausea.

"Please just push it in. I can't even feel it, I promise." When 12.5 mg was in, I felt sleepy but was still nauseous. "It's not enough—I can still feel it. I need more." What I had really meant was, "Please make this stop." I had felt this way for so many months. I had learned to accept it, but have since learned to be strong again and could not bear to revisit this feeling.

I don't remember if I got my second dose or not. I fell asleep and when I woke the next day the waves were gone. I ate Rice Krispies and milk. They stayed down and I went home. The only thing that made me believe that it truly had happened was the Band-Aid on my right side.

Saturday, August 3, 1:00 P.M. I had not seen Jim before I left the hospital. He had told me to call him in the afternoon, by which time he should have looked at the biopsy. I recalled the instructions he had given me right after the procedure.

"You shouldn't do any heavy lifting for 2 days and that includes lifting babies. You also should not run."

"You can't be serious."

"Yes I am serious. These are standard recommendations. There is a clot at the site of the biopsy and we don't want it to get dislodged." It was the least I could do to refrain from running for the day, so I did not go. Precisely at 1:00, I paged him. I had a list of tasks to do while waiting for him to call back. Pick up Cheerios from the floor—done. Wash the dishes, put away the children's toys—done, done. Clean up the den—the phone rings!

"Hello."

"Hello. This is First American Bank. We are offering . . ."

"No! Don't ever call me again! I don't want anything!" I slammed the phone down and took a deep breath. I needed to know what was in there. Healthy cells? Cirrhosis? Necrosis or—the phone rings!

"Jim! Hi."

"How are you feeling? They told me you slept well."

"Yeah, the Phenergan helped a lot. Did you have time to look yet?"

"Yes. We were pleasantly surprised. There was not frank cirrhosis. There were fibrous bands in the portal areas but no full nodules. Do you want to see it? It's your call. You can see it if you want to. A picture is worth a thousand words."

"Yes. I would like to see it." No one else had ever made this offer. "I didn't get to see the last one, but I read the report in the computer."

"It must have been a pretty bad report."

"It said there was a lot of necrosis—"

"Sheri, the last biopsy looked like dog shit!"

"Okay, so last time there was dog shit, now are there any healthy cells?" This was what I wanted to know. Did I regenerate healthy cells? Did I do it?

"Yes—lots of healthy cells."

He said more but I do not remember it. There were healthy cells and nothing else mattered.

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I can't tell you how many times I circled the hill on my block. I just kept going and going and going until I was done crying. I realized that for all of these months I have been scared. Still, despite this fear, I needed to move on and have always gone on doing what I had to do.

I circled the block for the last time and felt that perhaps in time the worries of these months would fade and we would close this chapter of our history. I turned the corner and started running home as fast as I could run. When I got inside, I was more red and drenched than usual.

"You've been working up a sweat tonight, lady! I hope it felt good."

"It felt great."

SHERI ANN KEITZ, MD, PhD

Durham, NC

FINALIST, 1999 Creative Medical Writing Contest

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