BOOK REVIEW

Sacred Space: Stories from a Life in Medicine. BY CLIF CLEVELAND, MD, MACP. Philadelphia, Pa: American College of Physicians; 1998. 210 pages. \$21.95.

The personal focus of this book is presaged in the foreword by O. Thomas Feagin, who skillfully sets the tone and prepares the reader for the rich narrative to follow. Indeed, the book's riveting personal stories made me begin thinking of Dr. Cleaveland as Clif, just as his patients, friends, and colleagues do.

Physicians who, like Dr. Cleaveland, trained in the 1960s will be intrigued. Many stories will remind them of, for example, medical school training during which we felt abused, the self-deception that we were indifferent to patients, the dehumanization of medicine as technology expanded, our "workaholic" ethic, our sometimes very fragile but unexpressed emotional states and their potential consequences (a colleague's suicide), the inefficiency and frustration of training in Veterans Hospitals, universal obligations for military service and the threat of being sent to Vietnam, or jail, if we didn't toe the line, and the Berry Plan (a program in which universally required military service upon completion of medical school could be deferred until completion of residency), to indicate a few stories that rekindled old memories.

But, this book is not a diatribe about the failings of an increasingly old way of medicine. Rather, it is an inspiring compendium of stories that show how Dr. Cleaveland's love and respect for human beings and human life prevailed in many difficult situations, of his own vulnerabilities and fears, and of his own personal growth. He wasn't always successful, but he always tried—and cared. His sense of duty toward patients, family, and colleagues, as well as to medicine, is profound. He really was there for many people, for example, a suicidal colleague who resisted help and a patient who fought and resisted his ministrations. He also was able to receive help from others, such as his dying father and some special teachers, one of whom was a nurse. We also appreciate in his stories his unending opposition to discrimination based on race, financial status, gender, bureaucratic machinations, and religion. We know that Dr. Cleaveland was like Sally and her nurse who, "would never surrender to the awfulness that surrounded them."

One of the book's recurring themes is that we are losing the personhood of the patient in clinical medicine. To quote, "Medicine is not simply a branch of chemistry or the biological sci-

ences. Clinicians live especially among stories: those of their patients and their colleagues and those that seek expression in their own souls . . . Patients are not diseases but human beings with complex histories who happen to have experienced illness or injury." We learn that one does not take a history but, rather, "I take in my patient's story . . . to define the immediate illness as part of a continuity of experience rather than an isolated calamity." More lucid than the best primer, Dr. Cleaveland's stories show us how to accomplish this: avoid the typical "physician-directed interrogation" for solving only the medical aspect of patients' problems; rather, listen for the patient's story.

All of this and much more emerge from the stories that begin with his growing up in La Grange, Georgia, where Dr. Cleaveland rebelled early from discrimination against the poor and African-American populations. We next follow his stories through pre-medical work at Duke and medical studies at Oxford and later Johns Hopkins. We learn that he appreciated the more humane English approach.

There is a poignant story of an experience similar to one I had, of a medical school colleague committing suicide shortly after beginning internship. Dr. Cleaveland laments (as I did) that a career was never to be "because of a cry not uttered or not heard by the rest of us." Beginning with his first patient, who died (he was sad but was expected to remain aloof), we begin to hear of his experiences over the years with many rewarding and difficult patient scenarios, always tinged with humanity and caring, as he eschewed the traditional, uninvolved approach with patients and entered into their worlds with a very apparent joy and sense of privilege and awe.

For example, we hear in "A Letter from the Grave" of the posthumous gift to Dr. Cleaveland, of a long-term patient's engagement ring, "because you were with us during the worst times of our lives and because you supported us through these times . . ." Dr. Cleaveland's wife, Ruzha, to whom the book is dedicated, wears the ring.

Despite his emphasis on the broader, personal dimensions of medicine, Dr. Cleaveland was no slouch as a diagnostician. This is apparent in the detail of several stories, especially "A Call From Bologna," in which he eventually makes a diagnosis of thallium poisoning. No doubt about it, he had disease expertise, but he also appears to have a unique ability to integrate it with the personal dimension to understand the whole patient.

I highly recommend this book. It will interest most physicians and students—and be valuable to them. The book is well written and reads easily. It is not at all didactic but relies, rather, upon recounting experiences via wonderfully told stories. This book can encourage us all to better understand how our own journeys and our patients' overlap. It is in these journeys, Dr. Cleaveland's stories show, that a sacred space of caring, quiet, and compassion occurs, often in the context of grief, fear, exhaustion, and candor—and always grounded in love and respect for human life.—**ROBERT C. SMITH, MD**, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

JGIM solicits reviews of new books from its readers. If you wish to review a book, please submit a letter of interest that identifies the book in question (title, author, and publisher) to Robert Aronowitz, MD, Book Review Editor, JGIM, Veterans Affairs Medical Center (JGIM-111), University and Woodland Avenues, Philadelphia, PA 19104; telephone (215) 823-4470; fax (215) 823-4450.