HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

"Heart"

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Delores Hailey* is a patient on the heart transplant wait list. Her case is unique in that she received a transplant 12 years ago. Despite impeccable self care and adherence to her medical regimen, her transplanted heart is failing. It was from a young donor, but like our own organs, has a genetic predisposition all its own.

I visit with Delores on rounds each morning. She greets me wearing brightly colored pajamas, her husband Winston by her side. Her breath is sometimes short. Her jugular vein quivers just above her clavicle. After I examine her and ask the official questions, the ones whose answers will appear in my chart note, I pull up a chair and ask the questions that connect us. She tells me about her family. She tells stories of her granddaughter, her friends and her faith. She tells me how hard it is being so far from home.

One day Delores tells a story about a group of people who have the same last name, but are not related. They meet once a year for a two-day picnic. There are over a thousand like-named people who come together and, according to Delores, have become a family of sorts. She tells me she would like to find all the other Haileys and do the same thing.

"You are the Delores of the thousand Haileys," I say.

When we hear the words, we agree they sound like the first line of a poem. We decide to each write a poem using that first line. It is a small challenge to pass the unknown stretch of time while she waits for her new heart.

That night, I begin my poem. I write the first words that come to mind. I do not edit or think too much. When complete, I think to myself, I cannot show this to Delores. It is about death. Someone has to die for Delores to live. And although death dances around much of what we do as physicians, to confront the human complexities of someone else's life ending so Delores can live seems like a Pandora's Box I don't want to open. I put the poem away and hope she will forget.

The next day, Delores tells me about getting a letter from the mother of the man whose heart beats in her chest now.

"He was young." She pauses. "Driving his wife and new baby."

Her voice breaks and then becomes whole again.

"They survived."

Delores watches my eyes fill with tears.

"I live my life for him too, you know," she says. "I'm sorry to lose this heart. It's been with me a lot of years."

I am both afraid and hopeful Delores will remember the poem assignment. Part of me wants to share more closely in this complicated journey with her.

The following morning, I bring a copy of the poem I wrote for Delores, folded in my white coat pocket, just in case. I did not change it or replace the difficult lines with easy ones. To do so would seem dishonest. Delores tells me she has written her poem, too.

"I almost didn't bring mine," I say.

"It was hard to write," she says.

"Sometimes I don't know where it will take me." The writing, I mean.

"To the truth," she says.

My heart beats fast and I am nervous to show her my words, my thoughts, my humanity. I feel like I have shed my white coat and stand naked before her. What kind of doctor writes poetry with her patient? What kind of doctor imagines a person, full of life, before he or she becomes a cadaver donor? And what kind of doctor shares those thoughts with the patient waiting for a heart? We hand each other our folded pieces of paper and put them aside to read later, alone.

When I read Delores's poem I am struck by both the similarities to and differences from my own. We choose many of the same words, but ultimately we write from our own perspectives. I write of someone else dying. Delores writes of someone dying, but not knowing if it will be her. When I compare the poems, side by side, I see that through talking to Delores, I have learned bits of who she is: the grandmother, the wife, the friend, the patient. But writing together we have shared what we were unable to with spoken words. Our connection deepens as our daily visits are enhanced by conversations sparked by the poems.

Perhaps the poems are prescient. A few weeks later, while evaluating ongoing shortness of breath, a CT scan reveals a slow-growing adenocarcinoma in Delores's lung. Just like that, she is off the list. I'm not the attending anymore, but I find her.

"We knew it might happen," she says. Her eyes are bright, her grip strong on my hand. She smiles, despite the news.

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"It's not what we hoped for," I say.

Through the poems, we considered the possibility of not getting a heart and what that would mean. Now, we sit together and talk about going her home, seeing her pets and spending time with her granddaughter.

Writing with Delores has changed me. I am less afraid to confront the complexities of life and death with other patients. I am less afraid to make myself vulnerable, by sharing the thoughts that lurk below my surface. Delores's willingness to write together allowed me to open the dialogue wider, to meet her closer to her own joys and fears. The gulf that sometimes exists between the white coat and the person behind the illness can be made smaller by the words and stories that hold us up in the face of dying and living.

**Delores Hailey is not her real name*

Delores of the Thousand Haileys
Written by Elizabeth Lahti, MD

Delores
Of the thousand Haileys
Waits for a heart.
Hers is broken
Not from a lover's betrayal
But the swelling
Blocking the oxygen swimming
From tissue to tissue.

Delores is one Hailey
The only one who will have three hearts.
The first failed
The second became a grandmother with her
Cradling her baby's baby in her arms.
The third, she wonders, where will it come from?
A father on his way to work?
A woman struck by lightning?
A boy in the wrong alley at the wrong time?

Delores Hailey waits.
Laughs with the nurses, crochets in bed
Looks at photographs of baby Olivia—now with
loose front teeth and pig tails.
Delores breaths, closes her eyes
And waits for someone to die.

Delores of the Thousand Haileys
Written by Delores Hailey

Delores
Of the thousand Haileys
One of many
But in the end
Just one-
Even those who love her the most
Can't share in the intimate parts
Of this journey
The path is hers alone

Failure? Not an option.
Success? At whose expense?
If she leaves him, will Winston know
She didn't go willingly?
Will Olivia remember Grammy's rules?
Will Delores' friends know how
Much they were loved?

So as Delores waits with her
Broken heart,
She waits for someone to die
The final question is—
Will it be Delores or someone else?

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