

**LETTER TO EDITOR**

## **Requiem in the Time of Pandemic**

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My heart is broken. Our hearts are full of sorrow. The world cries out with the pain and suffering of so many. My new normal is that I cry every day. I cry for all those lost to COVID. I read the obituaries and follow the daily death rate and I weep. I cry for the loss of so many souls who contributed so much, who loved, and thought, and enjoyed sunsets, had lovers, parents, children, grandchildren. I cried when George Floyd was brutally murdered and for all the murdered unarmed black men in my broken country. I weep for my country. I walk my neighborhood and cry when I pick up the tiny shattered bodies of baby birds, gently placing them in the underbrush of trees. I cry for the brutality against women. On May 12, 2020, gunmen invaded a maternity hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan, sought out the maternity ward, and gunned down new mothers and their babies. Twenty-four women - mothers, nurses, midwives, - were murdered<sup>1</sup>. A beloved friend of mine asked “Why?” Maybe the large men with guns came to punish women who wanted safe obstetric care in a country with a maternal mortality rate of 638 per 100,000 live births. Maybe it was part of the larger worldwide attacks on and neglect of women, as sadly we are seeing in the United States, where in certain regions poor women and minority women have been deprived of access to reproductive healthcare<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps there is no “Why.” As a Nazi guard in Auschwitz told Primo Levy, an Italian writer, scientist, and Jew, when he asked why he could not eat the ice off the shutter to alleviate his thirst, “Here, there is no Why.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it is merely because They Can.

But while I mourn, I feel alive and each breath is a celebration. To not feel and to not cry in this sorry universe would be akin to being spiritually dead. I am in awe of the constant fight against the darkness. Each day, I have watched the mother bird whose little babies I have buried. She has one broken leg that stretches out behind her, yet she hops on one leg, finds food to eat and food to feed her two surviving babies who run next to her beaks open, howling with life and hunger. I am inspired by the courage of all the medical assistants, and EMTs and nurses, and midwives, and nurse practitioners, and doctors who have cared for sick and dying people with COVID, some of whom have died helping others. I watch with wonder as professionals from all fields have adjusted their lives and focused their energies on teaching, communication, sharing, researching, and worrying about each other while juggling to care for children, partners, and parents.

And George Floyd – his last words and cries like a shot heard around the world - have led to a near universal uprising of protest and demonstrations, nationally and internationally. An amazing affirmation of “We will not accept that there is no Why.” For humans, being messy, there is chaos, devolution into violence by some, and the inevitable counterpoint of oppression pressing back. But there has also been love,

connection, caring, hearing each other, and the courage to continue to speak out.

And finally, I must celebrate my colleagues in the amazing field of obstetrics and gynecology who fight for the health and survival of women. We must not forget those twenty-four murdered women and children and must devote our every day to preventing violence against women by teaching, publishing, healing and outreach. And in this pandemic, I have seen so many health professionals redeployed to help on COVID units, and other care areas which are focused on this viral pandemic. They are so brave; coming home every night wrung dry – the tension and worry of becoming infected, possibly infecting their families, and the deep grief that I describe here burdens others as well. And of course there is so much uncertainty about the future. What will the world be like for our children?

But I would venture to reframe our grief and our concerns – we have been placed at a most poignant moment of drama and crisis in human history. There is something quite extraordinary about that. While it would be easy to drown in the toxicity

of the terrible political storm that is wracking our country, we push back with love, deep medical excellence, and with protest against injustice. My all time hero, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., another unarmed black man murdered in America, said: “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”<sup>4</sup>

And I would go further to say our spiritual survival requires and demands us to always find the beauty and the spectacular. As the poet, Jack Gilbert, writes:

“...We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.

If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,  
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.

We must admit there will be music despite everything...”<sup>5</sup>

## References

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