

Checkmate for the Soul

My soul was trapped in emotional gridlock, like I was a pawn surrounded by a world of bishops and knights. I held my head in my hands to catch my breath. Just then, my chaplain pager jumped off my hip, buzzing and twerping in a frenetic fashion, a jolting syncopated beat, much like my clenched heart that evening. It read, “Level One Pediatric Trauma.” I walked in a dreamy blur to the emergency department and waited for the ambulance to arrive. The tech was hanging by his arms off some equipment on the ceiling, stretching and readying for action. He made small talk. “At least we are on this side, waiting. Sure beats being on the other side.”

Such gentle ED banter, but it was the worst thing he could have said that night. How could he have known that 24 hours earlier I had dropped off my son at the emergency department in the children’s hospital just two hundred yards away? My son, prone to violence, who has severe mental illness, was living through an episode, a living chess war in his own mind, and so for his own safety my spouse and I had taken him to the ED. There had been no beds for him in the children’s psychiatric hospital, so he had to stay and wait for a transfer for several days. Because of scheduling, it had been necessary for me to stay on a night shift at the hospital that weekend. My spouse stayed with my son. So I was in the soul-clenching vise of knowing that my son was in crisis in the same hospital where I was serving.

I decided to be honest with the staff, although I was scared of what they might think of me, my family, and my professionalism. I leaned into the medical social worker’s corner and spoke my truth. “I may be off my game tonight. I have a child in a mental health crisis in the other ED. I am living on both sides of this tonight. If you feel I am off at all, I want you to feel free to call me on it.”

As I helped a family work through the aftermath of a motor vehicle crash that evening, I discovered a truth, at least for myself. In reality, we are always on both sides of trauma in our care. We all hold loved ones and stories that we bring close to us as we enter our work in being present for others. As I waited with that hurting mother, I felt attuned to her visionblurring disorientation while waiting for the next medical steps. Acknowledging that in myself helped me to be truly present. It released the pressure on my soul and allowed me to operate even in my brokenness.

The next day a staff chaplain came to me and shared that he too had a child who was struggling with violence and mental health. He spoke with deep feeling about the puzzle of being a parent in an impossibly hard situation. We stared at each other for some time, knowing the “checkmate” feeling of being stuck in a parenting bind with no easy resolution. He then began

to speak about how that struggle had changed the way he approached patients and even life. He shared how his ministry had been disrupted, even destroyed, and then transformed. I began to feel the bars of my own soul cage start to bend with the power of his meaning-making. I began to realize that knowing what it was to be “waiting on the other side” was a perspective that promoted healing with patients and, even more, with my own soul being. When I gave up on the idea of resolution or of things working out for the better or even of needing things to make sense with my child, I felt a new freedom. I could work to help other families heal, even as my own was breaking. My pawn became a queen, and the *stuckness* was exposed as illusion. The boxing in is always an illusion. When the board is cleared, I see the choice is always there to move toward my authentic self. That gives my soul the space it needs to allow others to do the same.

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