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The Feeling of Validation

It was not until I was wasting away on the couch that I felt the true fear of death. I had no idea what was happening to my body and felt so helpless. The relief I was searching for seemed impossible to find. I had just turned 69 years old a few months prior, and I was at a great point in my life. Work was running smoothly, I was playing pickleball every Tuesday, and I was spoiling my grandkids as usual. Nothing made me happier than hearing the “I love you, Grammy” after every goodbye. Needless to say, I was simply enjoying life and where it was taking me.

Until one morning, I was working at the store, and I became oddly fatigued. I checked my coffee cup, and it was empty. Considering that is usually all I needed to get through a shift, I was especially confused. I brushed it off and continued with my day as normal up until the afternoon. I started experiencing dull pain in my lower back, and it gradually became worse until I could no longer walk. I did not know what to do. I was the manager of the store so I could not leave my employees. Not to mention I did not want them to see me like this. I did the only thing I could think of, and it was to call my daughter, Kelly.

Once she arrived, Kelly immediately took me to the closest hospital in town, MercyOne. She could see all over my face how distraught I was, and it honestly scared her. I felt horrible for putting my daughter in a position to see me like that, but it was my only choice. When we arrived at the MercyOne emergency room, Kelly retrieved a wheelchair from inside the glass doors and wheeled me into the building. The waiting room was not overly packed, only a few patients here and there, separated by chairs in between. Mind you, this was a time when Covid-19 was still relevant and taken seriously in hospitals and clinics. So, I expected to be tested when I got there. But instead, I was only treated with condescending remarks. The receptionist woman, whose name I cannot remember, was completely indifferent to my pain. Kelly was trying her hardest to explain to the woman how seriously I needed to be seen by a doctor. But the receptionist only answered with, “There are many patients here all needing to see doctors. I will call you up when one is available to examine you, but for now, please have a seat in the waiting room. It shouldn’t be too long.”

Five hours. For five hours me and my daughter sat in those chairs waiting to be acknowledged by a medical professional. Kelly grew increasingly annoyed and continuously approached the receptionist stand explaining the increase in my pain. The response was always the same. “Ma’am, there are a lot of other patients here today too.” During that entire five hour wait, my organs felt like they were being twisted and turned in every direction. Finally, once a room became available, I was taken to x-ray to see what was going on internally. While the doctor examined the results, he began to casually tell me that I had either a fistula or a tumor on my intestines. He did not know which. Hearing this was devastating. My mind began jumping to the worst conclusions. “Is it cancer? How big is the tumor? What is a fistula?” The list of questions was never ending, and it did not help that he could not answer any of them. The doctor then proceeded to explain that I would need to go to a different hospital to see a tertiary surgeon. Nobody in that building had the ability to treat whatever was wrong with me, which only added to my concern.

The doctor finished his examination and told us we could go home. I was immediately taken aback, and thought to myself, “Go home? My pain was so bad that I could not even walk in this place, and now you are giving me a pat on the back and shipping me off. Am I being dramatic? Why is no one taking me seriously?” It felt like every time I opened my mouth to voice my concern, I was shot down by this doctor’s lack of interest. I was in too much pain to speak my mind, so thankfully, Kelly stepped in right away and asked how they planned to help me. After all, that is what we were waiting hours for. He was very dismissive and said there was nothing he could do because it was a case they were not equipped to handle. After 20 minutes of conversation with the doctor, he agreed to treat me overnight for pain relief and monitoring.

The next morning, I was discharged from the hospital with zero recommendation on my next steps. All I left with were some antibiotics and pain meds to “aid my discomfort,” as the doctor said. It felt so condescending for him to have described my pain merely as discomfort when it was nothing short of excruciating. Kelly immediately called the University of Iowa Hospital that morning in hopes of getting an appointment. She tried her best to explain how urgent my situation was, but they said the earliest they could see me was in nine days. So, for nine days straight, I laid on the couch wasting away in pain, having no idea what was wrong with me.

Finally, on the ninth day, my daughter picked me up and we drove to Iowa City for my appointment. Upon arrival at the University of Iowa Hospital, I was immediately shocked. Not only did the staff take my pain seriously, but they were so compassionate towards Kelly and me. The receptionist listened without interruption and validated every one of my concerns, working quickly to get me admitted. After being tested for Covid, which came back positive, I was escorted to acute care where I was treated by the surgeon who saved my life, Dr. Kristin Guyton. It only took Dr. Guyton a few minutes to understand the shape I was in. “You waited nine days after seeing the first doctor? Diane, that doctor should have sent you here in an ambulance that night. It is a miracle you are still alive.” Tears stung my eyes as I held back every emotion breaking through the surface. Kelly and I knew my pain was real, and all we needed was for a doctor to see it too.

It turned out that I had a fistula on my large intestine that interrupted my digestive process. The fistula was causing excrement to leak into other areas of my body, which created a substantial risk of sepsis and death. This caused me to spend 23 days in the hospital, due to unexpected complications after my surgery. During my stay, I had to receive two gastrostomy tubes due to malnutrition and had to undergo a procedure which resulted in the placement of an ostomy bag. For anyone who does not know what an ostomy bag is, it is an external pouch that allows waste to pass through a surgically created opening on the abdomen. So, anything I ate or drank almost immediately made its way into the ostomy bag. Not only did I feel disgusted by the bag of poop attached to my body, but I was also extremely embarrassed and ashamed. The only thing that kept me optimistic was the amazing hospital staff that worked so hard to take care of me.

From the moment I walked into the University of Iowa Hospital doors, I felt nothing but validation and compassion by my team of doctors. Dr. Guyton even moved my hospital room, so it was next to her personal office and only a few feet from the nurse’s station just in case I needed anything. The day of the surgery, I had a vivid memory of being in the operating room, scared of what might happen to me once I go under anesthesia. Looking up at the surgical lights and seeing nurses bustling around me, I felt Dr. Guyton’s hand. “We got this Diane; you are going to be okay.” She proceeded to hold my hand and wait until I was ready. That short yet profound moment was all I needed to have hope.