

Flickers

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FLICKERS

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ARRIVING AT WORK

Sometimes, on my way to the office, I remain enveloped in the drama of the morning rush; it lingers heavily around me. Sometimes, in the solitary confines of the car, I express my frustration – at the lack of parking, at garbage in the street, at people driving selfishly. But sometimes, through that fog, it happens: I truly notice something. A leaf, a tree, the light. For that moment, my internal chatter and my slavery to time disappear. Awe shimmers through me.

Sometimes, the awe disappears when an anxious thought intrudes. Sometimes, the awe transitions into gratitude. Gratitude for these few moments of unclaimed time: in between home and work, I am neither mother, partner nor physician. I am just myself. I appreciate the silence. I decide that I do not need to obsess over time. I feel generous. These few moments, when savored, are a gem. They render the rest of my trip to work light and hopeful.

Usually though, by the time I walk through the office doors, I have stuffed my private self in my backpack and donned my professional self. Sometimes, it feels like a dead weight. Sometimes, like a privilege. Usually, I drop my keys on the desk. The clutter they make is my reality check, my wake-up call for the beginning day.

EARLY-DAY

Sometimes, I have a sluggish start to my day. Sometimes, my mind feels so sharp it is as though I am 20 again. Sometimes, I lean back as I listen to a patient. Sometimes, my hands hover tensely over the keyboard, fingers at the ready. Sometimes, my shoulders slump under the weight of the complexity. Sometimes I close my eyes at the sadness of the story. Sometimes, as a patient speaks, I think “This is a beautiful person.” Awe flickers in and out.

Sometimes, patients cross their legs as they sit on the exam table; sometimes their eyes are round with worry. Sometimes, their forearm tattoos are mysterious portals to their life; sometimes, it is their jewelry. Sometimes a patient complains about another physician. When this happens, I usually look at my hands with discomfort and even, shame. Are we all doing our best? Am I doing my best?

MIDDAY

Sometimes, I am running late. Sometimes, I am dissatisfied with the care I have given. Sometimes, I am upset at the demands people have because it is uncomfortable for me to push back. Usually, in any of these situations, my portals to awe shut down. My voice hardens and my body language stiffens, perpetuating negativity. Usually, on days like that, I do not allow myself to stop, and everything is a drag.

Sometimes though, a peaceful thought intrudes, and I remember that I do not need to be perfect. Sometimes, I recognize that it is not only about what I do, but also about how I am. Sometimes, it is a patient’s glowing graciousness that brings everything to a standstill. It fills the office and thaws my mood. Gratitude and peace flicker in and out.

Sometimes, I commiserate with a colleague. Sometimes, the exchange is like a thud: dull, and without an echo in either of our hearts. Sometimes our exchange is spot on and we laugh together. The joy and warmth of community linger like crackling embers.

END-DAY

Usually, my work is unfinished when I leave to pick up the kids. Usually, the trip to school is chaotic and rushed. Usually, I don’t have much time to think as the evening shift of dinner and homework begins. Sometimes though, there are moments of unexpected respite when everyone is busy and no one is calling me.

Sometimes, I use that time to look at my phone. Sometimes, I do an extra load of laundry. Sometimes, I lean against the kitchen counter and stop to reflect. I wonder if it is possible for me to be at peace with my work. I wonder if peace, like happiness, is not a goal to reach in the future, but something to be found in *this* moment. I wonder if I can create peace in my day, rather than waiting for peace to happen to me. Usually, my reflection is interrupted, and the respite is gone, leaving only a trace - like the cream and crumbs of a finished cake on an empty plate.

Tomorrow, the cycle will begin again. Tomorrow, the flickers will glow again. Tomorrow, I might ask myself at the start of my day: *how* do I want to be today? ■

Biographical note

Sandra Derghazarian is a community neurologist and a physician coach who has loved stories for as far back as she can remember. *Storylines* is a column in which she shares stories about work and life. As much as possible, she tries to stay loyal to the messy and sometimes contradictory experiences of everyday life.