



Thursday Memo – September 11, 2014

Blessing #232

I count my blessings.....often. Every day, pretty much.

However, this past April I remembered Blessing #232. The spring Society of Correctional Physicians conference featured a talk on sex trafficking. The statistics were dark for such a well-to-do nation and Atlanta (the conference host city), was near the top of the list of notorious cities. The speaker reminded me how thankful I am that I was never raped, beaten, sold, pimped, starved, drugged, or abused. Granted, my childhood wasn't cushy, but I wasn't subjected to the physical, mental, or emotional tortures that so many of our children and adolescents have endured. And yet we've met those children in our juvenile facilities, our detox units, our women's prisons, and even our men's prisons. We've seen the impact of abuse manifest itself in behavioral problems, personality disorders, aggression, addiction, and more. Women more so than men. That doesn't mean that men are not victims too. When we women go bad, we go real bad. We turn inward and abuse ourselves. And it takes a lot to get us that bad.

I remember one female patient in our detox unit. She was yelling nonsense, singing obnoxious songs (loudly), and banging on the door occasionally with her feet. I couldn't believe she was in a room with two other ladies, making all this noise. Worst of all, she was right next door to my exam room so I heard every syllable. It was a little difficult to conduct intake exams and even I was getting frustrated. When it was her turn to be seen, she appeared surprisingly respectful and polite. I asked her what all the fuss was about. She felt everyone was ignoring her and wanted to get some attention. I warned her that she was getting negative attention from the security and medical staff as she was disrupting the entire unit. I was pretty sure this was not the attention she meant to attract. I asked her what she was looking for.

We started talking about her life before prison. She cried as she shared with me how she was sexually and physically abused multiple times before she was even a teenager. Drugs helped cover up the pain she experienced every day. Now, off drugs, she was reliving that pain and couldn't hide from it here. The forced abstinence made her face her demons head on. Everybody handles demons differently. She wasn't handling them too well. I listened. I felt helpless, but I listened. I couldn't erase any of the bad memories, but I listened. I let her know how sorry I was that this had happened to her. I listened. I let her know that I knew she wasn't the only one here who had been subjected to exploitation and trauma. Many of our incarcerated women (and yes, men) have been victimized and survived but are now coping with the pain by unhealthy behaviors. I gave her words of encouragement that she could work through those demons that haunt her. She had to be strong and ask for help and support when she needed it, not by banging on doors and singing "Proud Mary" at the top of her lungs. She stopped crying and seemed more

focused, more self-confident. She went back to her room next to mine and didn't make a sound. An officer came by and checked on her because she wasn't acting out as was her usual. "No, I'm good. I just don't feel like it now".

I don't know how long my words lasted with her. Maybe she's reflected on them, maybe not. I am so lucky that I didn't have to endure what she had to, what many of our patients had to. If I did, I don't know if I would have been strong enough to not make poor choices and end up behind the wall. I could have been that vacant face, the kicking, yelling, angry patient that can't bear to be alone with myself.

I think I'll move that blessing up to #1 and count it every day.