



## *Thursday Memo – October 30, 2014*

### **When Dreams Die – by Warren Ferguson**

Despite having a bunch of notes to complete, the urge to write is too strong. About two years ago, I wrote a lighthearted TMM about an immigrant family living the American dream. A young couple from a Mediterranean country pulled up roots and moved to Worcester over a decade ago. After the usual upheaval of a life turned upside down by a new culture and language, they worked hard and quite successfully to buy their own home, take family vacations and were loving life despite the chaos of a two-parent working family, juggling work, kids, chores, etc. Their oldest son is my son's age, with their second born here in the U.S. about ten years later. Their son graduated from high school and started college recently.

After only a few months in college, their son quit school, began smoking too much weed and started obsessing about suspicions of identity theft in the family. It became clear to his parents that something was very wrong. Three hospitalizations later, he has been diagnosed with schizophrenia. My heart sank during two visits with the son and his mother following the hospitalizations; the son with no insight about his illness and the mother was so distraught and desperate, she just wanted get her son back. Following a recent hospitalization for nearly a month, I read a discharge plan that seemed to lack cohesion which included psychiatrist, therapist, and day treatment in three different systems spread across central Massachusetts. Today, their son is on a psychiatric unit in a nursing home at such a young age, after a 24-hour hospitalization for a dystonic reaction to a phenothiazine. While he sits with an uncertain future, I sat with his mother alone for what was supposed to be a health maintenance visit.

Forty-five minutes and a box of tissues later, I sit here still trying to grasp what it must be like. It is difficult not to imagine that I would be just like her if it happened to my son: utter sadness; incredulous anger pointing toward a broken care system intermingled with furor aimed at the ignorant assumptions of first responders; a compulsion to understand what caused this terrible disease; a determination to exhaust every possible caregiver option to make her son better. I share her grief. I have been this young man's doctor since he was a child. He had been a well-adjusted and studious boy who presented the usual challenges of adolescence.

Her words: "I so wish it was a problem with his heart. At least, he'd be getting the attention he deserves". "They asked my son to spell his name to see if he was confused while his head was twisted in spasm. My son is NOT stupid." My words: "You must feel like the dream you had for your son has died, that a part of you has died." "Trying to answer WHY is a normal part of grief but focus on today and save your energy. This is a marathon, not a sprint." "Are you eating and sleeping, taking care of yourself?"

I think that I helped some today, at least I hope that the sadness I feel right now took some of the burden from her for a few brief moments. I have carefully committed to making a couple of calls to her caregivers but am careful not to make promises that I can't keep. I've been down this road before with other parents and their children. While life changes are inevitable, the impact of major mental illness on this young man, his parents and his brother has and will continue to leave their mark. Adjustments will be made but certainly their dreams for the future have been changed forever.