I like cabs – and the drivers that inhabit them. The drivers teach me about the world. The vehicles carry history. The drivers often share stories. One cab driver happily agreed I could share his story with you.

I met my cab driver in Kansas City during my recent travels. Walking my usual race pace through the airport and nearing Ground Transportation, I picked up the phone on the wall to order a taxi and head to the hotel. “2 minutes,” I was told, and exactly 2 minutes later a single yellow cab meandered through the sea of Ubers, braking at the curbside near my feet. He pleasantly smiled, professionally requested my destination and lifted my carry-on into his trunk. The car started along the 22 mile ride to the city and when he learned my profession, he started to share his story.

He was born in Sudan. His first daughter was, too. He was born healthy. His daughter was born blue. He described a normal prenatal course for his wife although I got the sense that no ultrasounds were done. With time and the skill of a rare pediatric cardiologist, his daughter’s “blueness” was found to be “transposition of the great vessels.” Told his daughter would die within 3 months unless operated upon, he made arrangements for the first two surgeries in Sudan. When his wife was pregnant, prior to the delivery, he had applied for a U.S. visa and, shortly after his daughter’s birth, was fortuitously granted one through the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program. His family moved quickly to the U.S. She underwent her third surgery, thrived as a child and recently entered college. Needless to say, she is doing well now.

Of the 50,000 immigrant visas annually (and randomly) granted, it seems like a miracle this worked out for him and his family, just when they needed it. Chance plays a role in all of our lives but it seems that fortune more readily falls into some laps as compared to others. As my husband initiates his work providing legal aid to immigrants in the Texas detention centers, I think about how much the outcomes for mothers, fathers and children depend upon chance. The complex immigration issues we are facing as a nation of us force us to confront what we believe is fair, equitable and right in our world. We have to think about what makes us lucky.
Of course, what we choose to do with our “lucky” selves matters. It turns out that my cab driver was an optometrist who practiced in both Sudan and Saudi Arabia prior to his daughter’s birth. He responded with silence then a firm “yes” when I asked him if he missed optometry. He described being the breadwinner for his family and never made plans to repeat his education in the U.S., knowing well the high costs of doing so. He clearly thinks about his prior days as a clinician. Yet he seems happy about the choices he has made. He expressed feeling fortunate.

He is yet another reminder that it is the systems (and the people within and behind them) that either facilitate or prevent people like his daughter from getting what they need. On our Maternal and Child Health service, we care for patients from all of the world, many of whom have complex stories behind them. I am grateful when they share their stories as it motivates me to do more to support health and well-being.

Uber has its benefits but you can continue to find me in the yellow cab.