

Insights into the doctors, patients and culture of emergency medicine.

Working Knights

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Aliens in Our Midst

I find myself caring for a great many aliens. They are legal and illegal, male and female, adult and child. They sometimes speak foreign languages, and their skin may not look like mine. Generally they are not identifiable by any superficial characteristic. I know they are aliens because as I treat them, I learn that they are citizens of difficult and troubled countries, whose borders lie all around my own safe and comfortable land. And I become immersed in their cultures every night in the emergency room.

I realized they were aliens when I read about them in the Bible. Exodus 22:21 says “Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.” Psalm 146:9 says “The Lord watches over the alien...” God himself watches over the dispossessed, sensitive as He is to wandering people in search of a better life. Scripture doesn’t specify how they look or sound. I have found that the people I see, who live in fear and loneliness, are nothing more than aliens who come to the emergency room just to escape the wilderness of their lives.

Phil was one of them. Drunk on New Years Eve, he broke his hand in a fight. Cussing me for being too slow he paced the emergency room. When I finally sat down with him we had a little exchange, then came to an understanding. He was drunk he said, because he was going blind at age 23. Shoving his thumb deep into his already blind right eye he explained that the light would leave his left eye soon. His baby, two months old, was in the waiting room. He said he had to get drunk because it was all too much. A new baby and blind eyes unable to watch her grow up Phil lives full time in a land of enormous sorrow and drinks just to take away the edge. He came to me to have the pain taken away from his hand. But that was just the tip of the iceberg. He is an alien looking for a place where his body is whole and he is free of the terror of his blindness.

James was another. Sitting in camouflage pants and T-shirt, with messy brown hair and slouching posture, James was the typical rural Southern teen male. His South Carolina inflection made him no different from any of the young men I see in a shift. He came because of a rash. His grandmother told me the rest of his problems. “His

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momma's dead and his daddy's in prison." He was impassive. He knew the tragedy of his own story too well. He was an alien to the world where moms and dads raise children, where care and affection flow like rain on parched young men.

Sometimes my patients are hurled out of their worlds and into mine by sudden tragedy. I think of Roger, unable to move his legs after being shot in the spine by his lover's jealous boyfriend. "Will I walk again? Will I Doc?" I didn't know if he would. He had entered a world where violence was the price of passion. I don't know how many people from that world I have cared for, as men proved their manhood with fists and knives, as women were beaten for a sharp word, as children were shaken for crying. All of them aliens to safety. All of them looking for a place to sleep in peace.

I think of the many boys and girls I have seen whose lives are empty of the love they need. Ignored by parents for years they come to believe that they can only find security and tenderness by offering their bodies. Instead of playing games they play adult. Too soon, they are parents themselves without ever enjoying childhood or adolescence. The cycle continues as their infants are soon exiled from normal affection by the spiral of distrust, infidelity and rage that brought them into the world. I see these children and children's children, because of accidents, illnesses and sexually transmitted diseases. They are aliens using romance and passion as a rickety footbridge to the land of true love.

Danny was drunk every time I saw him. And every time, he wanted narcotics because his brother had "stolen" his prescription. He looked older than his 35 years, with tired eyes and lined face, his belly swollen with fluid as his liver died slowly of alcohol and drugs. The things he desired most were slowly killing him. I wonder how many days of his adult life he had been sober, with clear eyes and mind? He was an alien to clarity, to sobriety. He was a prisoner in a country of deadly things. He needed a land where he could be free of his addictions. Ultimately, he died a slave to the chemicals he wanted so much.

Russell threatened to kill all of us at one time or another. We expected to see him come in the back door with a shotgun some night. Thank God it never happened. Mostly he was just drunk. He would

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fight with the paramedics after he called them and clutch his chest for the 300th time, saying he was dying. He would scream profanities until we said, “Russell, there’s a baby in the next room, please don’t do that!” and he would cry and apologize. One of my partners heard him quote flawless sonnets by Shakespeare. Most of his adult life had been spent in prison. Russell even murdered a man there. What banished him from the land of the living? I never found out. Maybe his father was a drunk who beat him. Maybe he just met the wrong people. He was a tragic exile from the good things most of us enjoy, an alien to love, light, peace and health. I imagine that on the right path he would have been a doting father and grandfather, a teacher, a farmer, a mountain of a man who kept the nursery in church on Sunday morning. I know he loved his mother and friends. He cried out loud when we told him that his tattooed drinking buddy had died. Russell himself died of lung disease from smoking. We were aliens to one another I suppose. But I liked him and he liked me I guess. After all, he never actually killed me.

Amelia, at age 32, has diabetes so severe that she is blind. She is hospitalized every month or so and I sincerely doubt that she will ever reach 40. It’s true that she never took care of herself when she was younger and newly diagnosed. She was frequently in the hospital with her glucose wildly out of control, then went home and ate candy like there was no tomorrow. She’s pitiful now and it’s partly her fault. But that doesn’t mean she isn’t one of God’s children. She’s simply an alien to health. She will never do the things that other women in their thirties do. She won’t travel, exercise, or work. But God commands that like every alien, she be treated with kindness.

As a physician, I also forget how many of my patients are aliens to prosperity. I drive a nice car to the hospital; I live in a large house; I send my children to school each day in clean clothes without holes. But sometimes I get angry when patients return without having filled their prescriptions. But what can they do? Sometimes they could do better. They could stop smoking and drinking and use that money for their families. But many don’t have a habit that robs them; they just have nothing. And I’ve seen a truckload of them in the rural South. They

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must feel like exiles, living as they do in a country so wealthy it sells gourmet dog food.

It isn't just the emergency room. Every day I pass aliens. Men and women and children whose lives are so far from mine that I could scarcely understand them. Their joys and sorrows unique and their troubles so terrible that my greatest problems seem trivial. They may be carrying guilt or pain, disease or sorrow. They may be lonely, depressed or mentally ill. They may be gay or straight, newborn or ancient, righteous or evil. God didn't make a distinction. He simply said to care for the aliens. It makes sense, really. Because if we follow Him, we remain aliens ourselves as long as we live on earth. All he wants us to do is look after our own. In the final analysis, everyone is the same. We are all traveling in search of the country that will finally be our home.

The Big Possums Walk the Night

Spring and summer weekends always seem to be the same in the Oconee Memorial Hospital Emergency Department. The EMS radio chatters the same codes over and over. Signal 13, signal 45, code 6. (Laceration, intoxicated, altercation). I typically drive in on Friday and Saturday nights to see a parking lot full of young people smoking and laughing while friends are seen as patients. I guess if you hang out in the hospital parking lot, eventually you're bound to see something interesting.

One recent shift I was bemoaning the fact that so many bad things happen at night. I was talking about this to my good friend, Sgt. Neal Brown of the SC Highway Patrol. He summed up the problem. "You see Ed, the big possums walk at night," he said succinctly. Andy Griffith couldn't have said it better.

As such, I would like to briefly call on my interesting, but generally unused, zoology degree to explain why it's wise to avoid the big opossums at night. You see, opossums are among the oldest and most successful of all mammals in the world. They have successfully reproduced and lived in almost every environment on earth. They are mostly nocturnal. They will eat virtually anything. Except for their strange propensity to walk out in front of moving vehicles, they seem to have amazing survival instincts. But they can be mean. Ask anyone who's ever accidentally encountered one in the dark, seen it's gleaming eyes and sharp teeth in the flashlight, then heard it hiss in anger. Little wonder that some mornings the dog is limping on a bloody leg and the cat, atop the woodpile, looks stunned from the opossums well meaning, but misguided, amorous intentions.

So how can we apply this to human behavior? There are some big opossums out there, my friends. I hope to instill this understanding in my boys as they grow into adventurous manhood, as well as in any reader who tries to learn by reflection instead of experience. The big opossums like to fight. They'll fight anyone, anytime, for something as slight as an annoyed look. They don't have the same sharp teeth, (although they do bite), but rest assured they have no compunction about slashing, stabbing, beating or shooting anyone who gets in their

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way. They have a gleam in their eye that is usually brighter when intoxicated. They are resilient. They'll roll their car over a mountain, break multiple extremities and walk out of the hospital against medical advice. They seem to undergo almost weekly violent injuries and go back to the same watering hole for more of the same. I have said and still maintain, there are some people you just can't kill. Mutual of Omaha's 'Wild Kingdom' could have devoted months to this species. "Watch as Jim attempts to come between the giant two legged opossum and his potential mate! Notice as Jim tries to avoid the broken beer bottle!"

They are a truly fascinating species. To their credit, I haven't found many that I couldn't get along with and I see a lot of them. All I try to do is show them respect, maintain a reasonable distance and make it evident that I am not a threat. (Of course, other standard rules apply, like don't move suddenly, don't surprise them and don't leave food, money or prescription drugs lying around).

The big opossums are a part of the social milieu of America that will never go away. Although potentially dangerous, many of them are hard working individuals who just let go a little on weekends. Any other time they're as nice as pie. They often do the jobs no one else wants, but that we all recognize as necessary. As such, I suppose they deserve a little fun. I just wish it didn't always involve drinking and fighting.

The bottom line is this. The world is dangerous enough; we all know that. So it makes sense to avoid those situations and groups which increase our personal risk. My mom and dad used to say that there wasn't anything worthwhile going on after midnight. Now I see how right they were. Because after midnight, the big opossums walk the earth. And they are a species to reckon with.

Breath Shepherd

I'm home tonight. Downstairs, in the stillness of this house, my wife and children sleep in warm beds. Walking through the house at night is wonderful to me; a symphony of breath, each person a separate instrument as they collectively breath in time to the metronome of life itself. It's interesting how something so common can move me so; but not surprising. How many years of my life have I devoted to breath? Or to its preservation? Airway, breathing, circulation. Always, breathing. And when I step, quietly, through the halls and doors of my darkened home, the rhythm of breathing fills me with secret joy and thanksgiving.

My wife Jan breaths heavily in her sleep, the breath of the tired laborer. Sixteen hours of parenting and the feather-bed receives her kindly, a worker who has earned her dreams. Samuel, my seven-year-old, breaths like he walks, with stealth. A child who with frightening silence, glides through the house and slips behind his victims to shout "gotcha!" He's my ninja. He loves the silence of the night, playing or watching movies, even driving in the car on trips. His breath is silent in the dark as still as he.

Seth, age five, snores his exuberance. His adenoids are too large and consequently, his sleep is interrupted by sputters and pauses of varying lengths. His sonorous breath as disarming as his smile; as loud as the energy with which he approaches play. I worry about his breath sometimes, but not too much. One day, those adenoids need to come out. When he is in the right position, he sometimes breaths quietly, a stocky angel, smelling vaguely of brownie.

Elijah, age two, is so quiet in his sleep that I often stop and put my hand on him. His breath moves his chest only slightly and sometimes I am compelled to put my hand by his mouth and nose to be reassured by the warm moist air that he softly exhales. Like his mother, he earns his sleep with intense play and more intense emotion through the long hours of light. Night is a relief for him and he crawls into bed with joy in his heart, asks to be covered in his soft blanket and drifts away to dreams that I probably could not fathom.

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Elysa, age one year, breaths in a whisper of air. To quote Doctor Seuss, “Like the soft, soft whisper of a butterfly”. Not a snore, I can hear it, but must listen closely. She is so bright and busy when she is awake, but in her sleep returns to the infancy so recently past. Sometimes I touch her too and occasionally wake her by accident in my zeal to ensure that oxygen is passing as it should into her lungs and into the blood that rushes beneath her pink-tinged alabaster skin. Her breath, like a wee cup of tea, is sweet and warm and moves in tiny volumes.

It isn't always so lovely and gentle. I recall nights when RSV infected my children and when their breathing was rapid and shallow. Jan and I sat many nights by wheezing, struggling children as we gave albuterol nebulizers and I wondered when to stop being their doctor, become their worried father and take them to the emergency department where my partners were working. The retraction of belly under ribs, the hollow cavity of the neck above the clavicles, these signs which we fear in children not our own are harbingers of abject terror when they appear in our own and cause otherwise sleepy nights to be filled with hour to hour, minute to minute uncertainty. And then, what a relief when no tubes need to be inserted into tracheas, when no ventilators cycle to replace the normal bellows of soft breath. What joy when sick children sleep with no threat that they may stop breathing and parents' minds can slip away to peace again.

More horrible still, I can recall times when my children choked on food eaten too fast. I remember with anxiety the look on Seth's face when the air would not move, when breath was far away, crippled by the imperative airway which was blocked with food. I remember how we smacked his back, how his face turned from crimson back to pink, and how thankful to God I was that he did not turn cyanotic and leave me. I remember my own times, waking with stridor from some bizarre combination of laryngitis and overly reactive lungs. I know that horrible sense that air, breath, would never come again. Breath the lovely becomes breath the priceless when it stops.

Small wonder that the word spirit is derived from the Latin, spiritus or breath. It seems, as our loved ones breathe, that life itself moves in and out of their bodies with perfect, cyclic regularity. That every cycle

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reproduces God's leaning over Adam; mere clay, and blowing divinity and animation into his inanimate shape.

Certainly, as doctors we see the analogy. The math is so simple. Breath equals life. No breath equals death. Spirit equals life, no spirit equals physical death. And we therefore spend our careers watching the rise and fall of fifty thousand chests, listening to the character and quality of the spiritus that moves in and out of every patient for whom breath has become difficult or in whom it may imminently cease.

So, there I am, a guardian of breath. Night watchman for the lives that are part of me, my family who sleep within my hearing, within my touch and sight. It is my most sacred duty to keep their breath safe. But next, to keep the breath of all of those patients who are my own. Breath guard, spiritus shepherd. I roam the night with fear and wonder, watching, listening and feeling for anything which might stop the very thing that enlivens us all.

And so, I think I'll go back downstairs and get back to the work that I love best and tip-toe between beds, listening, touching and watching as life itself floats through my family and my house for yet another night.



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