

Precipice

Brian Deady, MD

The arena is buzzing with anticipation. It's the second game of the first season for Vancouver's new Junior A hockey team. Tonight they host Seattle, and I am seated directly behind the Vancouver bench. I've just met the trainer and looked over the team's medical gear, noting a spine board, hard collars, laryngoscopes and endotracheal tubes among the ibuprofen and ice packs. I'm hoping for a good, clean game; the thought of attending to a seriously injured player while thousands watch unnerves me.

The lights dim, and we stand for the singing of the national anthems. At the south end, the spotlight finds a man standing on a red carpet on the ice, supporting himself with a cane. Unaccompanied, he begins singing *The Star Spangled Banner*. His voice is deep and rich. I am struck by the symbolism of this man singing this song tonight.

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Only 11 days before, at 6 am (Pacific time), near the end of an exhausting night shift, I had been yawning between sips of bad coffee as I faced a mountain of unfinished charts. I looked forward to going home to the noisy exuberance of my children. I would hug them and swing my littlest one around until she filled my ears with two-year-old giggles. Then I'd make my way to bed.

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Just then, Tim, one of the orderlies, burst out of the staff lounge where the TV was located. "They've bombed the World Trade Centers."

"What?" I said, surfacing abruptly from my reverie. I ran over to investigate and parked myself in front of the television. Hours later I would force myself home.

That evening, after a fitful sleep, I was back at work. The

TV in the waiting room was on, volume turned way up. Between patients I paused to watch the troubling images.

Susan was also working that night. New to our department, she was a competent and caring nurse. A US transplant, she had lived here for years since marrying a Canadian, but she still spoke with a big ol' drawl as large as Texas itself. I loved her accent. That night she seemed withdrawn, hunkered down.

"Are you okay?" I asked, meaning something more solemn than the dreary words expressed.

"Ah'm awright, thyank you," she said, without a trace of anxiety.

Later, playing on her sense of humour, I tried to lighten the atmosphere. "Susan, why doesn't Dubya speak like you? He's from Texas, isn't he?"

"No. He thinks he's from Texas but he's from Myne."

"Myne? Oh, Maine, right?"

"Yeah. Say, why do you like to tease me?"

I smiled a tight puckered grin. In my mind, tonight, she represented all Americans. "It's my way to ease the tension. Look, I just want to say I'm sorry. You know, about what's happened."

"Hey, thyank you. Ah'm sorry, too. It's really awful, isn't it?"

Over the next couple of days, I frequently found myself in front of the television, until I could no longer stand to watch the scenes of destruction and the parade of talking heads. I passed most of my free time with the newspapers, CBC radio and the Internet. It seemed everything had changed. I felt like an actor walking through the scenes of my life, only half-believing the lines I delivered. I wondered if we were all at the edge of a precipice, ready to plunge over.

Eventually I realized I couldn't live my life preoccupied about the future. I had no influence over world events and had to regain control of what I could. My patients, coworkers, friends and family were the people who mattered, who

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shaped and defined my life. I had to live in the present.

A few days later, Mrs. S appeared in the department. She was 88 years old and felt lousy. The two of us performed an elaborate dance. I tried to uncover the etiology of her lousiness, and she responded with bewildering, vague answers. Despite her cardiac history, I came to believe there was no organic cause for her distress. The source of her discomfort, I speculated, might be depression.

“Do you live alone, Mrs. S?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do you have family, anyone who comes to visit?”

“Well, no. I’ve only got one nephew. He calls every now and then, but he lives on Vancouver Island and I don’t see him much.”

“You must be lonely?”

“Well, maybe, I suppose. But you know I can’t get it out of my mind, those thoughts. You know, all those people.”

“All those people?”

“Yes, I just keep thinking about all those young people.”

Her mouth was curled in pain, and she stopped to wipe the tears from her eyes. “Their innocent faces — what it must have been like to know they were going to die in those planes and buildings. Murdered by those savage terrorists. And me, here, I’m so old, doctor.”

* * * * *

Now it is September 22 and I am at a hockey game, listen-

ing to the American anthem. Behind me two young men stand and begin singing. I turn my head enough to catch a glimpse of them. They appear to be working men in their late 20s, the kind of people who might actually be conscripted, if it comes to that. They have their hands over their hearts, so I decide they must be American — Seattle fans — even though they are behind the Vancouver bench. I realize that many other fans are singing too. Thousands of Canadian voices rise up to sing of America, a country that is hurting, that tonight doesn’t feel so foreign. I don’t usually sing at sporting events, but I join in, belting out the words. A lump grows in my throat.

**Thousands of Canadian voices
rise up
to sing of America,
a country that is hurting . . .**

“. . . the land of the free, and the home of the brave!” is drowned out by the cheering crowd, as the vocalist ends triumphantly. Then everyone joins him to sing “O Canada.”

Finished, the man leans on his cane, turns, and walks from the ice.

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