

Essay/Personal Reflection

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The spaces between a breath can hold stories. Stories of beginnings and conclusions. During the summer before I started medical school, a summer I had initially planned to spend shadowing a physician, I found myself volunteering at an elderly home instead. It was an unexpected detour, but one that filled my days with stories I would come to cherish. Each one was unique, a mosaic pieced together from the moments of a life lived, a journey nearing its end. The elderly home was a modest building, nestled in a quiet neighborhood. Its hallways were lined with photographs of smiling faces, each telling a story of its own. The rooms were small but cozy, filled with personal touches that made each one feel like a tiny glimpse into a life well-lived. It was here, among the soft hum of television sets and the gentle shuffle of slippered feet, that I met Eleanor.

Eleanor's smile was the brightest thing in Room 12. She was 84, a former teacher who loved lilac perfume and crosswords. Her laughter often filled our conversations as she spoke of her students with pride and longing. Her eyes would sparkle as she recounted tales of classroom antics and the joy of watching young minds blossom. Volunteering at the elderly home was about providing comfort and companionship to those in their final stages of life. Each resident carried a rich repertoire of stories. As their friend, I was a temporary visitor to these intimate worlds. Eleanor openly shared her fears, her voice steady even when discussing her impending finale. "It's like waiting for the last leaf to fall," she mused. "You know it's coming; you just hope it's a gentle landing." Her words echoed on days filled with the soft hum of television sets and the shuffling of slippered feet. The elderly home is often misconstrued as a place of surrender. In truth, it's a community where life is celebrated and cherished. We shared laughter, alleviated loneliness, and listened. We bore witness to the raw emotions that come with facing mortality head-on. The stories I heard weren't always grand tales. Sometimes, they were small admissions. A regret of not dancing more. The warmth of a first kiss. The pang of a harsh word never apologized for. Confessions of a life lived in myriad shades. These moments, seemingly insignificant in the grand scheme, held profound meaning for those nearing the end. My role as a volunteer transcended simple companionship. I was a keeper of secrets, a witness to final breaths. This sacred space between life and death is where I found my calling that summer. In the elderly home, I learned the art of presence. Sometimes the best gift was a hand to hold, a story to hear, a silence to share. It was about being fully there, fully human, in the face of the inevitable. As Eleanor's breaths grew labored, her family gathered. A family united in sorrow, their hearts intertwined by the threads of shared loss. In those final hours, we became custodians of her legacy. When she departed, it was as she hoped – quietly, like a leaf's gentle descent. The room filled with a reverent stillness, a recognition of the profound transition that had just occurred. Walking the hallways of the elderly home that evening, I realized that volunteering there was less about the end. It was about understanding the importance of every moment leading to it. It was about the spaces between – a held breath, a shared glance, a quiet goodbye. These interludes carry a weight and meaning that often goes unnoticed in the bustle of life. I carry the stories of many like Eleanor. Each a reminder of the fragile, beautiful human condition. In the dimming light, I find solace knowing I helped make someone's final chapter a little less lonely, a little more dignified. It was a privilege to walk alongside these individuals as they navigated the most profound journey of their lives.

In the quiet rooms where life whispered its final notes, there was a melody of endings and beginnings. A melody for those who chose to listen. It was a song of hope, of love, of the indelible mark each life leaves on the world. As a volunteer, I was both audience and companion, bearing witness to the symphony of the human experience. Now, as I start my residency, the lessons from that summer remain vivid in my mind. The power of presence, the importance of listening, and the profound wisdom found in the spaces between breaths continue to guide me in my medical journey. In the fast-paced world of healthcare, I strive to remember the value of slowing down, of being fully present for my patients, just as I was for Eleanor and the other residents of

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the elderly home. That summer, in a place I hadn't planned to be, I discovered a part of myself I hadn't known existed. It shaped me as a person and as a physician, teaching me that the most meaningful aspects of care often lie in the quiet moments, the shared stories, and the spaces between. As I embark on this new chapter of my

life, I carry these lessons with me, determined to make a difference, 1 breath at a time.

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