

STORYLINES

FROM HOLLOWNESS TO HOPE

Sandra Derghazarian

Montreal Neurologic Clinic, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

sandra.derghazarian@gmail.com

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It's a cool spring morning and I am going for a run. The snow is gone and there is mud galore, but not yet enough warmth for the buds to reveal themselves. Nevertheless, the city workers have started going around in their pickups doing their landscaping work. As I pass through the park, I see a large tree they felled right next to the path. It is a sad sight; my running slows down. The tree lays on the ground, amputated - no trace left of its majestic height and beauty. No connection to its underground anchor of support. The poignancy of its downfall is amplified by a message spraypainted on its very large base: "My inside is hollow".

The message echoes in my mind as I pick up my pace. "Is *my* inside hollow?" I wonder. I check in with myself: no, I do not feel hollow. And yet, something does. These *times* feel hollow. We are collectively mesmerized by the light of our screens and their shimmering promises for more. As we turn our faces to this artificial light, our anchor to reality – attention to what is within us, in front of us and around us – is mercilessly relegated to oblivion. Our own unique, individual truth is abandoned, and the unique truth of the real world remains unexplored and untested. We forget about the other sources of light – relationships, community, nature and the inner world.

My thoughts are interrupted when I notice another runner. I raise my hand and say hello as we pass each other. He looks up with a smile. But in that exact moment, the cellphone in his hand rings. He looks torn for a split second until he turns to the screen to answer the call.

My mind goes back to the spraypainted message. And then to medicine. Is medicine hollow? No, I decide, medicine is not hollow. However, it is unbalanced. Some parts – like the biomedical sciences - are booming. This knowledge is like a lush and rapidly growing forest from which we derive most of our medical fruits. And other parts – like the knowing of ourselves and the knowing of our patients – is an arid landscape. In the current context of scarcity of time and resources, the promise that more data will bring more certainty is very attractive. However, it runs the risk of hollowing out the soul of our practice. The search for certainty reduces the patient to data and disconnects them from the meaningful story of their body and personhood. The search for certainty also reduces us, practitioners, to our analytical minds and severs us from our natural desire to relate to each other with respect and humanity. Both patient and practitioner lose the recognition of themselves as a whole person.

I arrive at the halfway mark of my run and turn around. There, across the street, I see the same runner as before. He waves at me and, pointing to his phone, says “Hello! I’m sorry!” I wave back with a big smile. The interaction leaves me feeling joyful and hopeful.

As I head home, I recall an African proverb: “A falling tree will make more noise than a growing forest.” There must be a borderland, I think, a place in the desert where new trees are silently growing. A place in the medical ecosystem in which there is a greater balance between the lush and the arid. A place in our society where individuals are anchoring themselves in reality and in their own truth. Come to think of it, there is. I know individuals who practice medicine with the goal of holding both knowledge *and* knowing in the same space. I think of this journal and its readership who work hard to name and validate that space. I see the younger generation embodying the concept of wholeness, groundedness and respect for humanity. I think of the runner finding joy in a moment of unexpected connection. You and they are the growing trees – the forest slowly expanding into the hollowness. You and they are the new life that is quietly changing the landscape of medicine and our modern society. You and they fill me with bright hope. ■

Biographical Note

Sandra Derghazarian is a community neurologist and a physician coach who has loved stories for as far back as she can remember. *Storylines* is a column in which she shares stories about work and life. As much as possible, she tries to stay loyal to the messy and sometimes contradictory experiences of everyday life.