

Musical Interlude

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For Christmas Eve, I offered to go behind the locked doors on Psychiatry Ward A. Our internal medicine team was scheduled to take call, and on a whim I'd brought my guitar and volunteered to play songs from the '60s that I'd known growing up in New York City. The patients on our 'psych' wards often have prolonged hospital stays and I hoped that live music might brighten their days.

That afternoon, before my pager went live, a nurse met me in an empty corridor away from the jittery buzz of the hospital and guided me cheerfully into the psychiatry common room. She gestured to a hard folding chair. I sat and anxiously surveyed the ten patients staring at me, then looked down at the guitar and began to play James Taylor:

"When you're down and troubled, and you need a helpin' hand / I'll come runnin' ...to see you again."

Several faces showed signs of recognition, and patients started swaying. I tried a Ben E. King song that had topped the charts in the '60s and again in the '80s, and a few voices joined mine.

"If the sky...should crumble and fall...and the mountain should tumble to the sea. (Then) darling, darling, stand by me, stand by me..."

Something was happening. Were the lyrics a vehicle for empathy? Understanding? More patients and staff wandered in to listen and sing. Between songs, we discussed whether the Eagles were the same, or better, after Joe Walsh joined.

A man in back said, "Play Hendrix."

"Which song?" I said.

"Purple Haze," he said. This particular song was tricky on acoustic guitar, but as I gave it a shot I realized that perhaps he'd wanted me to hear the words, and had wanted to share them with the others.

"Purple haze, all through my brain...lately things don't seem the same."

After 45 minutes of staring blankly, he smiled.

In this room full of strangers, people whose names I would probably never know, I was reveling in an old-fashioned sing-along and had lost track of the fact that I would soon be on call. We were human beings, rather than doctor, patients, nurses, staff—it felt like there was little difference between us.

Later that evening, back in the hum of the medicine floor, I met new patients with complications of life stress and poverty, cancer, alcohol withdrawal, pneumonia, pancreatitis. A blizzard moved in, but the admissions still came rapidly. It was a busy world without music.

On Christmas day, after finishing rounds and notes, I headed over to Psychiatry Ward B for a second musical interlude. The staff flicked off the television and set me on another standard-issue folding chair. As I watched several patients stand and walk away, I worried that the magic would not return. But two women remained sitting and began to sing Bob Dylan songs with me.

"How does it feel...to be on your own...with no direction home...like a rolling stone."

One woman talked of frequenting the Fillmore West in San Francisco in her youth, where she'd heard a young guitarist named Jerry Garcia play with his band, the Grateful Dead. With long, straight hair and casual dress, I could imagine her standing anxiously in a ticket line 40 years ago. I recounted concerts I'd heard at the Fillmore East in New York. She began singing Uncle John's Band:

"Oh the first days are the hardest days, don't you worry anymore..."

Perhaps even Jerry Garcia could not have known how those words would speak to a hospitalized psychiatric patient, or a doctor caring for sick patients in a county hospital. More patients drifted in, and a burly gentleman asked to play my guitar. It felt momentarily awkward: he was a patient, I was a doctor. Still, I handed him my guitar. He took the instrument deftly into his grasp and started into another '60s ballad. I watched his face relax. How good it must feel to borrow a guitar on Christmas Day and play a few tunes for an appreciative crowd. Now I was the one listening and singing along.

One of my partners has taught me that we are all wounded healers. We come into medicine not only to heal others, but to heal ourselves. I had conceived of the psychiatry sing-alongs as acts of giving, not anticipating that I might reaffirm why I'd spent much of my adult life in medicine: to connect with human beings

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in distress. I had seen that sharing a song—and an instrument—could transport a person from illness to a better place, or from the hectic world of doctoring to peaceful fulfillment, at least for a time.

That night, as I drifted off in a post-call daze, the words of Carole King and James Taylor ran through my mind, a reminder of how to keep the magic close:

“So close your eyes...I can sing these songs...you can sing these songs when I've gone.”

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