Terminal Restlessness

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Artist's Statement

Warfare terminology which characterizes serious illness as a battle that can be won and encourages “the fight” is frequently used by providers and healthcare marketing campaigns. The implication that if the patient is not prevailing, s/he is losing is concerning, as patients and their families may construe such loss as a personal, as well as medical failure.

In my practice, I often ask the dignity question: “What should I know about you as a person that will help me take the best care of you that I can?” Consistent with the warrior role, patients commonly respond, “You should know that I am a fighter to the end and will beat this thing.” This is also how caregivers regularly describe their loved ones, even in the terminal phase of illness.

Yet, other patients express frustration with their clinicians’ focus on winning the battle and the concentration of care plans and discussion on not giving up: “No one asks me what I want, or what else is important to me.”

The constant attention to the fight and the patient’s assumption of the warrior role inspired me to write this poem.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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The day you were diagnosed,
your soul grew warlike
and from that front
a combatant emerged
to fight the ardent battle
that became a passion
and consumed your days.
You said, “I am a crusader
and will not give up,
because how can the truly
courageous ever surrender?”
But, what else was important
as you fought away from home
Did anyone ask
what mattered outside
the bitter conflict
or if a ceasefire would dishonor?
Looking to the finish,
I wonder if the resistance
made you feel valiant
and why the unwinnable
was the most virtuous struggle
since no matter how you fought
the end would be the same.
Now overcome
in a restless fray
is your flailing
against your enemy
or a white flag waving
toward peace?

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