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Bargaining With God

"Systemic Sclerosis is a chronic multi-system disorder of unknown etiology characterized clinically by thickening of the skin caused by accumulation of connective tissue and by structural and functional abnormalities of visceral organs. There is NO CURE and the treatment is at present EXPERIMENTAL." This was a portion of the lecture delivered to the second year medical students at GWU in the spring of 2006. Preoccupied with final examinations, USMLE STEP 1 preparation and most daunting of all the unknown world of clinical clerkships; I was blind to the reality that the single most important patient I would ever encounter would challenge my precociousness as a medical student and teach me the artistry of medicine far beyond the confines of any textbook or seminar.

As I entered my third year of medical school, I did not expect that the most valuable lessons I would learn, as part of my training would occur outside the hospital setting. I engaged in an endeavor to care for a patient, indeed trying to find a cure for a patient who had an incurable disease in the form of Scleroderma.

Michelangelo, Picasso and Shakespeare were brilliant individuals that created timeless masterpieces; however, their genius pales in comparison to the perfection embodied by human anatomy and physiology. However, the naiveté of believing such a specimen is flawless is captured in the exact pathogenesis of a disease process like systemic sclerosis; where the human body ignorantly and ferociously attacks itself. Is it purely genetic, is it an environmental trigger, or is it a combination of the two that lead to the yearlong struggle and ultimate defeat of my patient? WHY HER? WHY NOW?

Dr. William Osler eloquently and poignantly stated, "The good physician treats the disease, the great physician treats the patient who has the disease." I traveled across the country and overseas to retrieve answers, in order to defeat this overwhelmingly hurtful autoimmune process that was conquering my patient. She undoubtedly received the best available medical care in the world, seen by globally recognized specialists; unwavering love from her surrounding

family as she continued to battle day in and day out. When asked to describe how she was feeling, she paused and then began to speak as tears trickled down her now waxy and rigid cheeks, "My hands and feet are swollen, my elbows and inner thighs are tender. Swallowing is a chore, even liquids get stuck. My muscle strength is deteriorating at an incredible pace, even getting out of bed is an unbearable task. My elbows hurt if I touch them; I repeatedly cough blood. My back is on fire along with the rest of my body; the itching is constant torture." She begged, pleaded and prayed - all her life a healthy, vibrant, loving woman; now a physical fragment of her former self; yet still hopeful that science will prevail and God will listen. Desperate to help my patient in her losing battle, I found myself making bargains with God, willing to make any sacrifice to gain an edge against the disease.

This past July I attended the National Scleroderma Foundation annual conference to better understand this disease process and become a more knowledgeable clinician. I unintentionally became a more compassionate person, after a brief encounter with Jill, a fourteen year old girl physically scarred by this disease; but unwilling to accept the stigmata that is attributed to chronic illness. She was unwilling to abandon her childhood and her inspirational story only further cemented my original desire to become a pediatrician. My father, a neonatologist by training, but a self-proclaimed historian told me no other profession in the world affords one the unique luxury to instantaneously better entire families. He further elaborated that Abraham Jacobi, the founding father of pediatrics best understood the importance of bedside manner; an invaluable attribute for any doctor. On September 8th, 2007 my patient passed away at the age of 56 and said goodbye forever, surrendering herself to God; this patient was my beloved mother.

It is incumbent upon me to maintain her legacy by pursuing the avenue best suited for each individual patient I encounter and never forgetting I am the ambassador of my patient as she once reminded me. Pediatrics allows me to represent the population that is unable to represent itself. Combine this advocacy with the hope and purity that is exclusive to children and this is no longer a job; but a realized dream. This is my new bargain with God.