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The Fingerprint of Time

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We often take time for granted. It becomes simpler to execute our daily routine without actively focusing on intent or ambition. But what happens when the brevity of time becomes all too apparent? Through the lens of a close friend being diagnosed with terminal cancer, I have grappled with the role that time represents for the physician.

Moving back to my hometown upon beginning medical school afforded me the ability to reignite old connections. A previous acquaintance from my community grew to be a trusted family friend and companion. Her breast cancer diagnosis was well known in our community and had become a part of her identity. Nevertheless, my friend faced her aggressive diagnosis with equal tenacity and grit—courageously wrestling her illness.

After battling difficult treatments for advanced breast cancer for several years, she came to me in her usual confident manner. "Just so you know, I'm finally terminal—they are giving me 2 to 5 months," she announced, with just enough sarcasm in her voice to oppose the big smile on her face. At that moment, the longstanding idea of us holding the reins of our lives was shattered. We all know our lives have a deadline, but how was she supposed to carry on knowing hers was approaching faster than she could stop it? *Why would her physicians choose to tell her she was dying?*

In receiving news of a cancer diagnosis, patients become rightfully overwhelmed by a myriad of emotions. They may feel a moral obligation to fight, to exhaust all possible avenues or to quiet the nagging "what if?" questions that plague their daily thoughts. There is no doubt a patient's support system interjects their own preferences onto the patient, in addition to physical and often painful manifestations of illness and treatment. These invoke intense feelings of anxiety, sadness and anger that threaten to overtake the identity of cancer patients; they are left feeling they have no choice but to fight the new dismal cloud cancer has cast over their lives.

The physician is much more than a healer, but a pillar of support who guides individuals through maximizing their quality of life with the fixed amount of time they have to live. It is in this guiding role that physicians uniquely reach their patients in a way others cannot. When physicians make the finite reality of time clear to their patients, they regrant patients the privilege to choose how they spend their time. The freedom to choose liberates us as human beings, with the greatest decisions we make being how we choose to spend our time.

I watched my friend slowly regain a piece of herself that had been buried under her cancer diagnosis. As a small piece of her support system, I was able to help fill subsequent weeks with love, faith, and hope, and watched as she was able to see her daughter get married. As time carried on, it began to lose its ominous sting of being restricted as each moment she consciously lived enriched her life and the lives of those around her.

So, what is the mark of a life well-lived or time well-spent? Though the concept of fulfillment is rooted in individual beliefs, it is the astute physician that illuminates the gift time represents to their patients— enabling them to achieve closure and gratification with the time they have left. Whether one week or five months, this empowerment adds the meaning we all crave to enrich our daily routines. In acknowledging the past, honoring the present, and finding comfort in the unknown future, we can all strive to etch our own meaningful fingerprint into the ever elusive, continuous flow of time.