

FIELD NOTES | FALL 2021

Memorial Days

By Brian Smith

We finished an appointment and the doctor said, “On we go to the next one.”

She and I were running late, a typical day in our medical oncology clinic. One of our examination chairs was on the fritz. We inhaled our lunches in between appointments. Then our other chair broke, too. After she answered a phone call, I heard her shocked cry, “What?!” and knew it wasn’t good news.

Despite these familiar harbingers of a difficult afternoon in the clinic, I noticed the bustle of excited energy around me. Our medical assistant practically skipped down the hall. Our nurse was even more smiley than usual, and that’s saying something. It took a glance at my calendar to understand.

It’s Memorial Day weekend. We have Monday off

Don’t get me wrong, I love my job. It’s still exciting to have a day off

I set myself a reminder: Call Grandpa. Then we entered the room of our next patient.

We walked into the room and greeted “Margaret,” a single mother in her 40s currently on long-term maintenance therapy for stage IV colon cancer. She was a familiar sight around here lately. This was (1) great because she has a delightful, infectious warmth, but also (2) not great because if she were healthy we would be seeing her much less often. Margaret’s disease was moderately controlled. It was not curable.

The visit continued in the usual rhythm with which the three of us were all too familiar: staccato questions met with upbeat, enthusiastic answers. How did her last treatment cycle go? “Better than the first!” Has she scheduled her follow-up CT scan yet? “Yes! And I just want you to know how nice your staff is! They have been so helpful!” How were (her son) Daniel’s college applications going? “Great! He did very well on the SATs! We are hoping he gets into my alma mater!” I looked over at the doctor and noticed she was also smiling. In fact, all three of us were smiling. Perhaps through osmosis, this appointment had received some of the clinic’s excitement for the long weekend.

Then the doctor asked, “Do you have any plans for Memorial Day?” Margaret smiled and looked at the ground. She nodded but did not answer immediately, invoking a pregnant pause. When she spoke, her words were suddenly more measured. Thirteen minutes into the scheduled fifteen-minute appointment, and this was her first answer that was not an exclamation.

“Yes, we have plans. This weekend is special for me every year.” That makes sense, I thought. She may have a veteran in the family, too. And even if she does not, it is a special day intrinsically. Our country’s solemn remembrance.

She continued, “Seven years ago, I was in the hospital. I had my first emergency surgery on Memorial Day 2014.”

“I call it my anniversary,” Margaret continued. She and Daniel had plans for Memorial Day. They were going to host a virtual picnic with their family back East. They were going to re-watch episodes of their favorite TV shows. They were going to call friends from across the country and reminisce about pre-pandemic life.

I shifted in my seat, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. At first, I was not sure why. I realized I had been expecting something more sobering. While the country took time to remember lost lives, I had guessed she would spend part of the day thinking about her own nearly-lost life with similar solemnity. Instead, there was what Margaret called, “celebration.” This was not a sentiment I had come across before. In fact, I had heard the polar opposite. Oncology “anniversaries” often trigger painful memories and worsening anxiety as well as depression. Before I had time to process this discrepancy, the doctor wished Margaret a “Happy anniversary.” Her appointment ended. The doctor said, “On we go to the next one.”

As I reflected on Margaret’s visit, I realized I had been projecting my own expectations onto her. I had unconsciously been defining her experience, and I had been wrong. What I had not considered were the reasons Margaret had found to celebrate her Memorial Day, reasons from seven years ago. Her friends, with whom she had not spoken in years, reached out and offered support. Her neighbors, who had taken over cooking for then-preteen Daniel and whose food was so delicious Daniel had asked for their recipes. Her colleagues, who had donated their precious sick days to keep her afloat. These special people were both the reason Margaret celebrated and, through their assistance, the reason she was able to celebrate.

As a field, oncology is infused with cyclicity. Treatment cycles. Routine imaging. All efforts are made to avoid perhaps the worst cycle in cancer, disease recurrence. I had assumed the anniversary of the day Margaret’s life had irreversibly changed was another terrible cycle in oncology. Instead, to Margaret it was a reminder that she had survived then and that she continued to survive still. Every anniversary was both a victory and a reminder of everyone that had supported her.

Now, when patients talk about anniversaries –of frantic hospital visits, of somber phone calls with diagnoses, of chemo cycles and surgeries and radiation and remission – I wait for their follow-up. Instead of assuming, I do my job and simply listen. Their characterization of what the anniversary means to them is what matters.

On Memorial Day I called my grandfather. We talked about what the day meant for him: a day of gratitude for the gifts and sacrifices of others. I thought about Margaret and Daniel, celebrating something similar. I hoped they were having a perfect day. I will be thinking about them on Memorial Days ahead.

On we go to the next one.

Brian Smith is a first-year medical student at the Stanford University School of Medicine. He is a graduate of Stanford, where he studied biology and English. Before medical school, he worked as a scribe in medical oncology and it was then that he found reflection and healing in narrative medicine. His interests include patient mental health, the patient-physician relationship, and physician burnout. His research has been published in the journal Blood and his writing has been published in JAMA Oncology and Pulse: Voices from the Heart of Medicine.

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