

A PIECE OF MY MIND

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A Daughter's Impact

It was a familiar walk back to labor and delivery room number 7. This room sits tucked away in a corner with the intent to shield grieving parents from the sights and sounds of new life. That day, the door was marked with a picture of a leaf harboring a single rain drop on a purple back drop, awaiting our arrival. For my wife and I, there was no escaping this new reality. Our baby had died.

In the weeks leading up to this day, our world had been turned upside down. On April 16, 2022, we had gone to a private clinic for a gender reveal ultrasound when the technician discovered the presence of several abnormalities and advised us to seek medical care. Subsequently, our daughter Hazel was diagnosed with Turner syndrome in utero. Due to the degree of fetal hydrops fetalis, presence of large cystic hygromas, and cardiac abnormalities, Hazel was given a terminal prognosis. At the time, there was no telling how much longer we had with her, but it was undoubtedly limited. For 4 agonizing weeks, we did our best to cherish this fleeting time with Hazel while simultaneously grieving the loss of her future knowing that every day with her could become our last. Each week, we were afforded an opportunity to see her on an ultrasound. Medically, this was to assess viability of the pregnancy, but to us, it was a righteous opportunity to see her while she was still alive.

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On May 19 during what would become the final viability check, Hazel's heart was no longer beating. After induction of labor, Hazel was born silent on May 20 at just 19 weeks 6 days' gestation at Tripler Army Medical Center (TAMC) in Honolulu, Hawaii, the same hospital where I had completed my clinical clerkship in obstetrics and gynecology during my third year of medical school and where I am currently a resident physician in otolaryngology. That day, we spent 8 hours with Hazel's body before making the impossible decision that it was time to part ways. Traditionally, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" plays over the loudspeaker at TAMC when a family and their new baby leave the labor and delivery unit. But that night, we walked out in silence, no baby in our arms to hold.

Everything about losing a child is painful. The grief that comes with such an experience is immeasurable and frankly unimaginable to those who have not gone through it. This grief could be so physically and mentally painful to endure that it was often easier to avoid

dealing with it altogether. For me, this meant avoiding conversations, events, people, and places.

When we left the hospital that night, I wanted so badly to never go back. The iconic "Pink Palace" that can be seen from nearly any location on the south side of Oahu had transformed from an exciting, dynamic place of learning to a constant reminder of the hardest day of my life. Everything seemed to become a trigger—the drive to the hospital, the hallways connecting the operating rooms to the labor and delivery unit, the call pager I was holding when we heard the words, "I'm sorry. There is no heartbeat." All around me, there were inescapable reminders that our baby was dead. I genuinely questioned how I would ever be able to go on for another 3 years at this institution.

Due to an upcoming outside hospital rotation, I felt relieved that I didn't have to return to work at TAMC on a consistent basis. In retrospect, this situation was perfect for avoiding my grief, but not for walking with it. When I started at the new hospital, I chose not to divulge what had just happened in my family to anyone I was working with. I didn't know any of them prior to starting at the hospital, and I was afraid sharing this information might negatively influence how I would be perceived or trained. I was worried that talking about Hazel may invoke emotions that could be perceived as weak or ill-equipped to deal with the intrinsic stressors of surgical residency. Because of these fears, I chose to avoid the subject altogether.

This pattern of suppression continued, and I thought I was doing a good job coping with the stress. There were days when the grief seemed to be more overwhelming than others, but I was always able to pull myself together, tuck away the emotions, and carry forward. Several weeks into the rotation, I received feedback that clinically, I was doing well, but that I needed to come out of my shell, engage more with others, talk more, and show a little more personality. In hearing this, I recognized that my outward demeanor was a true reflection of how poorly I had been dealing with the grief internally. I had been in survival mode, using all of my emotional bandwidth to get through work, but I hadn't been managing the grief. Rather, I was using work to try and stamp it out. Clearly, this wasn't working.

This experience served as a wake-up call for needing to change how I was dealing with my grief. I started to read grief management books and pray more often, which helped, but one of my regrets during this time is that I did not seek any form of formal counseling. I think doing so may have provided an outlet to better process my emotions, so I wasn't dealing with them in the isolation of my own mind. Despite not seeking counseling, I did continue to feel noticeable improvement by consciously acknowledging these emotions.

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A major turning point for me arose shortly after Hazel's original due date in October when TAMC hosted an event titled "A Walk to Remember." We were invited to this event as a family who had experienced pregnancy, infant, or child loss. My wife, son, and I attended this event. Here, we heard the names and stories of dozens of other families with similar circumstances. The lives of those lost were remembered and celebrated. This event struck me so deeply because all around me were parents who were brave enough to reenter the building where so many bad memories were formed. They weren't forced back here due to work obligations; they voluntarily attended to celebrate the life of their loved one. I know it must have been challenging to return to that building, yet here they were, creating positive memories and reframing the relationships with their children. Seeing these other families and finding comfort in our common experiences served to highlight to me the importance of community while processing grief. From hearing the testimony of these other families, I gained a deeper understanding that the presence of grief is only made possible by the initial presence of profound love. This not only helped to change the way I thought about my own grief, but reinforced to me that grief is not an emotion that we should deal with in solitude, but instead in shared reflection. In life's grand irony, I had tried so hard to compartmentalize my grief, only to end up finding comfort and solace by sharing Hazel's story in the very place to which I initially never had wanted to return.

I have thought a lot about whether there is some greater lesson in this story. Sometimes, I feel guilty thinking this way, as if the

value of Hazel's life is somehow reliant on whether or not I can articulate a specific impact. The truth is that although I am grateful to be Hazel's father, there will always be a part of me that hurts for her. I think this is something to which everyone can relate. Although individual stories of loss are unique, grief is the most universal of human experiences and each of us is touched at one point or another. Furthermore, physicians are privileged to play a role in some of the brightest but also darkest periods of patients' lives. Knowing pain and learning from my own experience with grief has improved the ability to empathize and to have difficult conversations. It has strengthened my desire to deliver the highest-quality care. It empowers me to take the extra step in developing a genuine human connection. It has given me an added tool to achieve what I desired most from a career in medicine—to help other people.

Because of Hazel, my heart is softer, my tone is gentler, and my patience is longer. I understand the power of holding a loved one's hand just 5 minutes longer because I know what it's like to never be able to get that back. I know the gravity words can hold because I've been suffocated by their weight. Although by no stretch has this road been easy, I can honestly say I am a better man, husband, father, and physician because of our journey with Hazel. Although I will miss her for the rest of my life, I cherish the opportunity to continue working at the place where she was born because it is now a place where I feel deeply connected to her. It is my hope that although she was born silent, as time moves forward, by keeping her memory alive, Hazel's impact will continue to speak loudly.

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