

Throwing Leaves At The Sun

“Astrid” and I bumped into each other years ago in nursing school. It happened that we were opposing forces (literally) in a pillow fight orchestrated by our roommates. Peals of laughter cascaded in waves as she extended her hand to help me up. From then onward we hurled ourselves into the frenetic pace of nursing school, often in tears or exhausted. Neither of us had even a remote inkling that it paled in comparison to “real nursing, or of the poignantly exquisite fragility of mortality.” Astrid” would be tested far more severely than either she or I could ever imagine. Nothing could prepare us for what was to come.

In the middle of our junior year, Astrid began to complain of chest pain. She would fatigue easily which, for nursing students is commonplace. Still, we worried about her and suggested she visit the school physician. “It’s probably nerves,” he said, and sent the two of us on our way. He suggested a prescription for valium. “Astrid” rolled her eyes and we walked slowly back to the dorm. There were no more pillow fights after that.

That February, we were in a discussion class when “Astrid”, in the middle of a sentence, suddenly stopped talking because she was so short of breath. Her parents were called and she was taken by wheelchair across the way to the main hospital. All of us were surprised when she was admitted. I silently chastised our doc for letting her suffer; as though he were the person responsible for her malady, whatever it was, though I secretly suspected an attack of anxiety probably had exacerbated things. I wished it had. But I knew in my gut something was horribly wrong. I just knew.

The cancer was inoperable. Ca of the mediastinum. It wrapped around her heart and lungs and literally choked the life out of her. We were devastated.” Astrid”, though, faced her illness with all the force she always gave and when she could, she laughed.

I sat with her toward the end. In tears and denouncing the unfairness of it all, I leaned against her frail body seeking comfort. I still hadn’t realized that I was in mourning for the loss of our friendship. Like so many nurses, I was angry because I just couldn’t save her. I was afraid because the cancer struck like a serpent that had been lurking in the background poised to strike. All these years forward I can still hear “Astrid” laughing and rolling those enormous beautiful gray green eyes. Briefly, I considered leaving school and said so, loudly and often. “Astrid” made me promise to stick it out for her. Somehow, here I still am, twenty eight years into “real” nursing. Whenever I feel the urge to throw in the towel, or “chux”, a vision of my long gone friend floats into view, forever hiding in the shadows of my memory. I can almost hear her say, “You promised...”

Probably the greatest lesson I learned in nursing was the profound remark “Astrid” “uttered just weeks before she died. “Marth,” Trying to stop something like this is just like trying to throw leaves at the sun.” “Just because you probably won’t get anywhere doesn’t mean you quit trying.” At the time I didn’t understand. At the time I probably didn’t want to. We tried to laugh away the tears. Eventually we fell asleep as the nurses quietly navigated around us noiselessly hanging meds and checking IVs. I get that now.

Thanks to “Astrid” and thousands of patients later, I understand the moments in nursing when it just feels like giving up or giving in. Those are the moments I have to smile and try to

keep going. Somehow, nurses always manage to get it done, however exhausted or exasperated they may be. Every patient teaches a lesson and thanks to “Astrid,” I will always at least try to toss leaves at the sun...

Written by Martha Crowninshield O’Brien R.N.
Falmouth Hospital Maternity Unit