

On Witnessing

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Supernova – a powerful, luminous explosion marking the final stages of a massive star.¹

With three months left of intern year of Internal Medicine residency, I took the leap and adopted a dog from Dallas Animal Services shelter. She is not an ordinary dog—or even a star. She’s a superstar: my SuperNova. She is a two-year old Lab–Pitbull mix. Her big brown eyes hold your heart, while her wagging tail could power a small town. Her world is simple: following me from room to room, shaking with full-body excitement when I pull out her harness, rolling over for belly rubs, and barking at squirrels. It’s her life, and she wants me to witness all of it—her excitement, her energy, her need for nourishment and support. In the way she so clearly expresses her desire for connection, she has illuminated how deeply humans value it too—though in a more complex form. We long for someone to talk with, to laugh with, to cry in front of—someone to witness our lives. Adopting her has deepened my appreciation for the patient perspective. When patients share their passions or describe how their symptoms affect daily life, it can sometimes feel tangential to the task at hand, especially during a busy call day. But those moments matter.

I cared for a patient with decompensated cirrhosis who shared that his asterixis was disruptive to his work as a writer. After discussing treatment options, I inquired more about his writing. His face lit up as he described his newest short story. In a few minutes, I witnessed more of his life beyond his diagnosis. As physicians, we have the privilege of walking alongside patients through illness—their fears, hopes, discouragement, frustration, and everything in between. We all want to be understood. Patients want their experiences to be seen, and physicians want patients to understand that we are doing everything we can for them.

Unfortunately, many patients do not have family or friends to witness their lives as they navigate illness. I recall caring for a patient with newly diagnosed heart failure, likely due to long-standing atrial fibrillation, who was preparing for discharge with multiple new medications, dietary restrictions, and follow-up appointments. As I reviewed his medications, I asked how he was feeling.

“It’s a lot—just, wow,” he said.

I slid down the wall across from him and took a deep breath with him. I asked whether he had a family member or friend he could connect with to decompress. He mentioned a friend he planned to call, then asked how I felt about Michigan winning the basketball championship. In that moment, I witnessed both the weight of his transition home and a glimpse of his life beyond illness—perhaps even a needed distraction. Greater than witnessing, I stepped into his emotional space and stood there with him.

We emphasize post-hospitalization follow-up for labs and medication adjustments—but what about emotional follow-up? What would it look like to ask patients who their “witness” is?

I am deeply grateful for the many witnesses of my own life: God, family, and friends. Before, I came home from the emotional highs and lows of being a physician to an empty apartment. My support system was always close—a phone call away, or even a short walk nearby to my close friend and co-resident. Now, I come home to my SuperNova—a sweet, resilient pup who has shown me the quiet power of witnessing each other's lives.

To my patients—it is a privilege to witness this moment in your lives. I hope to hold space for all that you are—your personality, your hopes, your fears, and your goals for your health.

To my Nova—my SuperNova, my Nova-bean—thank you for being my light each day. You have changed the trajectory of my life, and I hope I have done the same for you.

¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supernova>