

TRANSFORMATIONS



It's a big gift to be in a relationship where you can see the stories of another person's life and to be invited into that very personal space, not to judge, but to listen as they find meaning. My experience tells me that these relationships are rare. Yet in a world where so many of us seek to connect somehow with others – in our families and our careers – it really shouldn't be rare. As doctors, our patients invite us into their lives every day.

RECEIVING STORIES

With a time difference of twelve hours between Singapore and Canada, a constant during my medical school days were the Sunday morning Skype sessions with my mother. I often think about how much our relationship has changed through the years; we talk about all sorts of things and take turns listening to each other's stories. Somehow, that process has

made its way into my own practice when I communicate with patients.

Sometimes, the stories were tragic; like the day my mother shared her biggest regret: although she respected and loved her own mother very much, they never really shared a deep conversation. There's a Chinese saying that asks us to reflect: *just how many decades are in one human lifetime?* Life goes on. Leaves that were green in spring turn amber in autumn. At the age of 22, my mother married and immigrated to Canada, and slowly lost contact with my grandmother. Decades passed between visits. She was so invested in and busy with our family that she never got around to having a conversation longer than New Year's greetings. My grandmother went to live with my uncle in the UK and my mother felt that she would always be there. When my grandmother fell ill and passed away, my mother suddenly realised how many

moments she had missed. How my mother missed telling her just how much she meant to her.

Sometimes, the stories were charming; like when my mother told me about how she raised pet silk worms when she was a girl. Living in Hong Kong in the 1960s, my mother's family wasn't doing too poorly. My grandfather was a police officer on a civil servant's salary; they were comfortable enough but not rich and had none of the things young people are nowadays entertained by. Still, my grandmother looked for ways to create fun for her daughter. One day, she brought home a jar that contained a sprig of green leaves and a trio of tiny silk worms. My mother kept the jar by the window facing the sun and periodically replaced the leaves munched away by the hungry worms. My mother patiently watched as these creatures grew fatter by the day and spun themselves pyjamas

made of silver silk. There they went to sleep, awaking as moths to fly away, leaving behind their silk pyjamas for my mother.

SHARING STORIES

By chance, I got to share this story of my mother and her tiny friends with patients at a teaching clinic – a father and his ten-year-old son visiting for a check-up and travel vaccination. My mentor, Dr Ajith Damodaran, had encouraged me to interact with his patients. Few children like the idea, let alone the reality, of getting a shot. As my mentor readied the injection, I saw the nervousness gather on the boy's face so I had a go at distracting him. I asked the boy what his favourite subject was. He answered: "Hmm, maybe... science?" To which I replied: "You know, science is pretty neat because you get to learn about nature – all the things in the world and how they work." His eyes remained fixated on the needle; I guess I wasn't very convincing. Then, somehow the small story my mother told me found its way into our moment. I grinned and said: "You know, if you study science, you get to see and learn about cool stuff, like how caterpillars turn into butterflies and learn to fly. When my mother was your age, my grandmother gave her a jar with three silk worms..."

Shortly after, as they were walking out the door, Dr Ajith and I saw our young patient's face alight with excitement, quickly asking his slightly bewildered father where he could get some silk worms of his own.

MY OWN STORY

Somehow, I have become a physician, a physician at that uncertain cusp of beginning as a healer. I can't really remember with clarity how I was when I started. I have made sacrifices and there was the pain – both my own and the witnessed pain of others. Yet when I look back on my time as a student, the memories that I cherish most are made up of the stories I have received and shared with patients. Stories that have been drawn from my family and become a part of my being, just like the letters "MD". Warm stories that shine through my uncertainties with

wonder, mystery and endless joy. I see a young girl who is staring out her window, watching attentively the life of tiny beings preparing themselves for flight.

Sometimes, I think our lives are just collections of many life stories. Inside us are stories we inherit from loved ones, mentors, colleagues and patients that seem to collide and stick with us, and most of all, the small stories filled with wonder that we carefully pass on to the lives connected with our own... these stories about transformation.

Dedicated with love to my family and friends, and above all – to my mother. I've never told you just how much strength, guidance and inspiration your stories have given and continue to give me. ♦

A TEACHER OF MEDICINE

Dr Ajith Damodaran graduated from the University of Singapore with an MBBS in 1978. He chose family medicine because he wanted all of medicine and he thoroughly enjoys his solo family practice each day. He has been a tutor for medical students and trainees for as long as he can remember, and is also involved in geriatric and palliative care. While practice is very satisfying, "work is an interruption to life". In his "other life", he attends dance classes and is a tinkerer. He dabbles with electronics, photography, cooking and hydroponics among other things. He received the Deans Award for Teaching Excellence (2013/2014) from NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.



Author's note to students

When I graduated in June this year, I remembered this little piece of advice from a mentor. He said, "the degree that you hold represents an important achievement, but remember that your degree does not give you a monopoly on intelligence. Therefore, carefully fold it up, tuck it into your back pocket and walk into the world with a mind open to all that you may learn from others." In life and in medicine, we are eternal students; whether you are in school, a fresh grad, or an established physician, you are always learning. Happy Trials!

PROFILE



TEXT BY

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Dr Alfred Wong is an internal medicine resident at the National Health Group and Alexandra Health System, Singapore. He previously served as the coordinator at a ministry-funded community diabetes program in Toronto, Canada, and holds degrees in medicine and business administration. His research interest is in health systems and public health and his recent work includes a qualitative study to explore challenges and complexities in community nursing. In his "other life", he is a writer, photographer and an aspiring film director.

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