

Reflecting on Year One: A Beginning and an End

Caitlin Parke

Whenever I come home after a while away, the first thing I do is my usual sweep of the house. I'm not usually looking for anything in particular. Just the hidden treasures that I've forgotten about. Old diaries, forgotten T shirts, things I had once determined useless but now have a sudden need for. The week I returned home after finishing my first year of medical school was the same. I was looking for an unused journal, something I could scribble notes in while looking over incorrect Q bank questions. I checked the toy closet, nothing. My old desk was empty, too. Then I moved on to the filing cabinet in the storage room. Nothing. But as I was sliding the drawer closed, a folder tag caught my eye. *Alexander*. I had heard about my brother before. I knew my mom had a miscarriage before my sister and I were conceived. I knew he was cremated. His ashes were spread in a cove near the cliffs by my house. I remember asking her about him when I was in high school. "What went wrong?" "A lot of things. That is why I'm so lucky to have you."

Seeing his name written in the familiar script of my dad's handwriting, he was suddenly more real. Not just a memory, but a real tangible loss. I peeked in the folder. For the first time, in a home that's been mine since childhood, I felt unsure of whether or not I should look. Or whether I could look. It felt private. In the folder I found grief cards and ultrasound films, complete with arrows pointing out his spine, his two tiny hands and little head. There was even a film with a little quote "Hi, Mom and Dad!" Three Polaroids showed a tiny blurry baby wrapped in blue surgical cloths. A stack of papers was clipped together at the back of the folder. *Autopsy Report. Expired: 1/20/92. Male. Gestational weeks: 20. Brain: holoprosencephaly. Lungs: hypoplastic, left; aplastic, right. Diaphragm: absent, left. Ears: low set. Eyes: aplastic.* The sticky note on the cover carried my mom's careful notes. "Two problems: brain, diaphragm. No known genetic condition."

I put the papers back in the folder and slid the filing cabinet closed. And it all hit me. Not for the first time, but with a force much more powerful, having just finished my first year of medical school. I was struck by a wave of humility and understanding of why I am studying so hard. For months I spent countless hours in lecture halls and the anatomy lab. I pored over notes and textbooks with the occasional stress spiral about test scores. Much of the time it felt like running on a treadmill that was moving too quickly. Slow down a little bit and you're dangerously close to slipping and tumbling off the back. But standing there with my brother's autopsy report in my hand, I was reminded of how far I've come. I knew the images were ultrasounds and I could find the spine without the arrows. Holoprosencephaly, I remembered, was a defect in prosencephalon development that usually occurs around week five or six in utero. I recalled that the diaphragm relies on nerve roots three, four and five to keep you alive. It separates the thoracic and abdominal cavity. Without it you can't breathe. I could read the report. I knew what it meant. I felt what it meant.

After the brief thrill of understanding the diagnosis, I felt the weight of the knowledge. This wasn't just a report or a list of terms to memorize for an exam. This was a description of someone's baby. My mom's baby. Because of the clinical experiences that I have been fortunate enough to have during my first year of medical school, this isn't a new revelation. There is always a person, a loved one, a family member behind each diagnosis. That is what keeps me studying. Medical knowledge is interesting,

yes, but I learn it because someday that knowledge will save someone's life or offer them comfort through understanding.

During our first week of medical school we wrote our class oath. We promised to uphold many things: appreciation for our families, respect for our colleagues, care of ourselves. At different points throughout my first year, each of these elements has come to hold a deeper meaning. But the piece I continue to hold dearest to my heart is our promise to our patients:

"To recognize our shared humanity and treat those in our care with respect and understanding. To see them as a whole person and care for them beyond their diagnosis. To treat them with the same dignity and respect we would treat our own friends and family."

My first year challenged me in many ways. It pushed me out of my comfort zone and occasionally made me question if I have what it takes. But now, standing on the other side, looking forward to the next three years, I am filled with gratitude and excitement because this is just the beginning.



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