

Unspoken

Glenn John Arnowitz

I'm concerned about my rheumatologist. We met 15 years ago when I was a mess. At that time I dragged my stress, anxiety, insomnia and a big, fat, swollen left knee that plagued my days and nights into his office and pleaded for help. He was no Gregory House, but a small, gentle doctor with the best bedside manner I'd ever seen. Extremely personable and sensitive, he looked beyond the knee and not only found the right therapy to manage the pain and inflammation but through his concern and advice helped me find better balance in my life. After a while our appointments were limited to twice a year, basically a formality to renew prescriptions. A maintenance pit stop to ensure the knee is well oiled and on track. He always sauntered through the door with a musical "hello," a smile and a friendly handshake, eschewing the medical talk for the more personal. Our visits were always early, me stopping in on my way to work, and we usually spent the first 10 minutes bringing each other up to date on our lives, wives, kids, work and life in general. We would become so caught up in our discussions that sometimes he would forget to check my knee.

So when I stopped in a few weeks back for my year-end appointment, I was eager to share all of life's recent events—my younger daughter's foot surgery, my older daughter's college graduation, the news of my wife's cancer, the uncertainty of my job—and I was looking forward to hearing about his kids, weddings, grandkids and all. When he opened the door to the examination room, I immediately noticed something was different. No suave entrance, no tuneful "hello." He moved slowly, and his mood was somber and quiet. When I asked how he was doing, he answered, "I'm hanging in there." The room was filled with the three of us: Me, him and some unspoken tragedy or event. And since the small talk was really small, the urgency I felt moments before to share dissipated, and I decided to hold back.

The consultation was very brief. Just a quick look at the knee and goodbye. I left his office feeling awful, like something bad was hanging in the air unresolved. As I sat in my car I considered going back in and asking him if everything was alright, but I didn't. I also considered calling later on in the day, but didn't. Something obviously had happened. Family illness? A death in the family? Divorce? In the examination room when I sensed something was awry, I remember looking to see if he had his wedding ring on. He didn't. Hmmmm. But then again maybe he never wore it, and I just never noticed. Something was going on, though. He was hurting. Why didn't I just ask? I did. But maybe he was waiting for me to probe a little deeper. I didn't. Hey, we're not even friends, but in some strange way I felt like I let him down.

It's now been a few weeks since our appointment, and I find myself still thinking about that day. His "I'm hanging in there" response revealed so much more than it intended, and I neglected to open the door to that room to find out more. Why? I have 6 months until my next appointment to think about that.