

Not yet completed this course not yet out of the woods.

The sneeze and cough still produce paroxysms and spasms in that familiar left chest wall, lasting hours and sleepless nights. Complicated by fears of pneumonia further infiltration, consolidation, effusion, pericardial or pleural in the night hours, No, not yet graduated. But on completion of this course, what next...

After the degree is awarded what license will be granted...For credentialing authorities demand experience not merely theoretics. So I will appear before the board duly and provide my one and only work experience; this brush with death. I will, in due course, explain that I have seen him and he looks like the front end of a semi truck with the three letters GMC on his forehead and big teeth in his grill and two large eyes for headlights. He makes a roaring sound and snorts as he brakes to try avoid completely flattening my chest. They will question me, of course, to confirm the experience and to satisfy themselves that I've had sufficient experience in the field of subjective pain:

"What was it like in the ICU, unable to move for days" they will ask. A middle-aged lady with greying hair and pincer spectacles perched on her nose yes, she'll focus on the ICU when the breathing was so shallow and the dependency on others so complete. She will ask about the pain of being transferred from my gurney to the CT gantry, a pain worse than hell.

Having described the aftermath of meeting the Angel of Death and surviving, the board will begin to recognize in me the credentials of a survivor. They will recognize the paradoxical bliss in having been spared and the guilt of living with unearned credit. They will notice the initial brush with death paled in its lightning speed with the agonizingly slow period of recovery, mentally and physically.

Daily measurable improvements at first, plateau out later on taking one's patience to the limits. Activities of daily life taken for granted are now insurmountable objects to negotiate. I leave the hall of examiners with my degree confirmed but where do I go now...What kind of shingle can I hang now...They forgot to tell me that this kind of diploma doesn't get you anywhere in society out there. On my own, however, I discover the benefits of this new credential. Little things that so bothered me no longer do. I am quicker to forgive the weakness of others and foibles that used to get me upset. Prior obsessions no longer interest me.

Noise bothers so I seek the quiet spaces and rooms. All that infuriated me about my spouse now fades in the utter debt I feel to her in her angelic nursing of me day and night without murmur or complaint. With my patients in pain I feel a stronger common bond. Somehow their knowing of my ordeal opens up deeper channels and allows me some level of greater authority yet humility in discussing strategies of pain management. Even with my senior patients there is a sense that I too have earned some level of parity in discussing what might otherwise have been a little embarrassing due to age differences. Finally in the spiritual dimension of my life, my relationship to the rules, rituals, and legalisms demanded by Orthodoxy, I must admit that my brush with mortality and the utter feeling of Divine Grace and Salvation, my central concern is now the heart and sincerity, integrity, and connectivity with God.

All other religious aspects pale before this need for inner purity and clarity and those rituals that serve this function are now privileged. Finally, my relationship to other travelers on this fragile road, my only concern is to connect to everyone at the human level to that unique spirit that animates each one individually. God expressing him/herself through the particularity of each human being incarnating the Divine uniquely. I am so hungry to relate to others at this level a there is so little time left in life to waste on surface contours. So my newly-found credentials seem to be working as I now seek life and experience in a new key.