

A love letter to my patients

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A LOVE LETTER TO MY PATIENTS

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Dear You,

I want to start out by telling you how much you have meant to me these last twenty odd years. You have seen me in my early days at my most insecure, barely competent self to what I hope has been the best of me and of most service to you at your most vulnerable of times. I have seen you through your worst, and been there for the victories, small and large. All of it has been a privilege for me.

The past six months have been a rough ride. Unexpected, to say the least. Even terrifying at times. We hoped for the best but planned for the worst. We both consumed voraciously all the information we could to protect ourselves, our families, and each other. I learned how to not touch my face and taught you the same. I arrived early to work to review daily updated procedures and to change into scrubs – something I have not done since residency days. I learned how to don and doff the appropriate PPE. You learned how to express yourself through a mask. I limited my interactions with colleagues to video conferences and, like a new breed of superheroes, they guided us expertly and tirelessly through waves of ambiguity and worry. I took your increasing number of unscheduled anxious calls to soothe and advise you. I reviewed your upcoming visits to see which could be done virtually and which needed to be done in person. I cleaned the clinic room after you left. I wiped down every surface of my office at the end of each day and changed meticulously out of my uniform. I arrived home depleted. I soothed my raw and cracked hands.

When we could not meet in person it was tough for you – for me too. The lack of being right next to you, unable to evaluate through a shift in your eyes or a slight change in your posture your ease or dis-ease, was mutually challenging. When I did see you in-person, we both felt the COVID-19 tension between us. No more hand-holding through bad news or comforting hugs. And when you were admitted to that isolated

hospital room your fright in the midst of your delirium was palpable. You watched me in what must have seemed like an alien spacesuit without the comfort or familiarity of your family. I tried to be your family as best I could. When you thanked me for my service, tears welled up in appreciation.

Suffering, stress, and grief have felt surreal during COVID-19. Uncharted territory. There were times I felt impatient and rushed, falling short of my expectations for myself and probably yours as well. There were moments when I felt overwhelmed. But there was also desire and motivation to contribute, to the best of my abilities, in this unprecedented time. Then those initial weeks of adrenaline-fuelled activity and preparations stretched into months of chronic levels of anxiety and irritation as we both started to feel a little numb and frankly weary of it all. So insidious, these feelings were barely perceptible to me until I started to notice a change in my attitudes toward you. I started to notice your own impatience and abruptness, things I would normally have forgiven effortlessly. I was furious with you when you went to that gathering I told you explicitly to avoid. I thought you were demanding and self-centred that you did not seem to care enough to even do this small thing. I started to wonder why I was doing this job that required 110% from me as I was pulled away from my own family and friends. I was not sure I wanted our relationship anymore. To be honest, this isn't the first time I have had these thoughts about this demanding job. But I have always managed to stick things through. The magnitude of COVID-19 pushed these boundaries.

So, please forgive me for any time you felt less than completely cared for. I know you were facing your own burdens. I know you were doing the best you could as well. I know we were both getting worn down by it all, not by each other.

The following is not an excuse but an explanation. You see, I've been dealing with a great deal outside of our relationship too. While I have been able to manage the expected and unexpected turns we all experience in life relatively well over all these years, this pandemic shifted everything. There was a lot of uncertainty in advice and policies and procedures in those early days that forced me to navigate by myself. I was worried about you, but also about my own family. I was grieving not being able to see my own parents for fear of transmitting the virus to them. I was afraid that I wasn't helping my kids cope with the upside-down turn in their lives. My mom and father-in-law were dealing with new diagnoses of cancer through this whole mess. That day I was abrupt on the phone in April – maybe you didn't even notice but I did – my mom was undergoing surgery. The critical illness of a close friend happened just before lockdown began. The death of another dear friend's father happened in the midst of it. I have been forced to care and comfort the people I love from six feet away or, worse, just over a phone. I would leave the hospital after focusing on caring and comforting you, drained and depleted, to return home to try and reassure my own family.

I want you to know I tried to do all the things that worked in the past to keep me the fresh, expert, and compassionate physician you have come to rely on. I strived to sleep and eat well, to exercise and meditate

regularly. It wasn't enough. So, I needed some distance from you for a little while. Just enough to recharge my battery. Just enough to stop worrying for a little while – about multiple daily changes of clothes and sanitizing my car and what I was bringing home to my husband and kids. Just enough to remember why I went into medicine in the first place. Just enough to miss you again. Just enough to realize again that this was never a job. It is a calling. It has always been.

While away, I got to focus on just being a mother, wife, and daughter. I was able to reconnect with friends, albeit at a distance. I stopped watching the public health and news reports daily. I could breathe a little easier again. And in the last few days my mind has started to wander back to you. How you've been doing. What you've been up to. How you are coping.

It is said that distance makes the heart grow fonder. I am looking forward to seeing and listening to you again. Of helping you navigate through your decisions and lighten your burdens. Of hearing how your kids and grandkids are and if they will go to school – mine will. It will be nerve-racking but we will get through this together like we always have. In truth, we have had some success and good times during these six months and I was able to reflect on this. We have found new and effective ways to communicate with each other. We have lifted each other up. We talked perhaps a bit more about our lives, about our grocery outings and gardens. Small talk between friends.

We will get through this together although it will not be at the same point we entered. But I can't do this without you. As tiring as these six months have been, please know your role is as important as mine in this relationship. Please don't let your guard down with this virus just yet.

We are forever changed but there is opportunity for growth and learning. I will bring back my individuality to you somehow so you know without a doubt it is me behind the mask. We will share our stories with my colleagues.

Meanwhile, my wish is that you may enjoy every day – every moment – as best possible. That we find rest in every day. Follow the public health recommendations. Eat well, sleep, exercise, and take a break when you need to. I'll do the same. We have a lot more to weather in this storm, but I want you to know that I'm in it for the long haul. For better or for worse. I'm betting on the better. ■

Yours in sickness and health,

Carol