It was a Thursday when an ambulance brought my aunt to the hospital. Her breast cancer had metastasized to her femur, and the bone had shattered.

The next day, she traded stories and jokes with my parents from her bed. They learned from my uncle that she had three months to live.

When my sister and I visited her the following morning, she was unconscious. Her breathing was heavy, uneven. An hour later, after I dropped off my sister at school for play practice, I sobbed over my steering wheel in a corner of the parking lot.

I drove back to the hospital. Within an hour of my return, my aunt passed away.

Afterward, I could only think of how I had stood silently in her room that morning; of her labored breathing and the hum of the air conditioner; of my uncle’s words: “Tina, Patrick and Kelly are here. They came to say hello”; and of how I stood there unable to summon the strength to simply say, “Hi, Aunt Tina, I am here.”

I have never forgotten my silence.

Our conversations were long and animated. He would ask me about my life, my running, my education or fuss over whether I was wearing appropriate clothing for the cold weather. I would listen to his recounting of the latest of his medical maladies and his sometimes “colorful” descriptions of the nurses or residents.

I listened as he talked about his pain meds and physical therapy. About how he could no longer see. About how he could no longer walk. About the back pain that would wake him at night. About the loneliness that would engulf him. Many times we laughed about the food in the cafeteria or the latest failures of the local college football team. Other times, I would try to comfort him as he sobbed; his head would heave and tears would roll, all in utter silence.

I remember one time in particular when he asked me what the year was. “Six years ... I’ve had this for six years,” he murmured. “And all I can do is sit here and wait to die.”

I did not know what to say.

When did I decide to commit myself to medicine? It could have been during one of those clichéd childhood moments we all reference in retrospect. But I doubt it. After all, I wanted to be a train conductor, courtesy of Thomas the Tank Engine. As my mom will tell you, the intricacies of
trains were my singular obsession during grade school.

It could have been the first time I heard about replacing an eardrum with a piece from the outer ear—a procedure called “cartilage tympanoplasty.” Then again, maybe it was the moment in which I first heard the surgeon’s rhythmic, almost musical cant: “irrigation, please…” “suction…” “suture…” Or perhaps it was the nerdy thrill of actually seeing a dermapométe outside of that one medical textbook, p. 487, figure 13.5.

Perhaps it was the day I stood with two young parents as their wheezing, 3-month-old baby tested positive for RSV. Or when I placed my stethoscope on a scar and heard the repaired heart of a young boy with Down syndrome. Or when I stood near a 32-year-old woman as she heard sound on her left side for the first time following an aggressive ear surgery. In those moments, I knew I wanted to have a real and palpable role in shaping patients’ care.

More likely, it happened during those silent moments. The day I could not find the voice to say hello to my aunt when I visited her in her hospital room. The winter afternoon when my friend at the hospital began to cry. Or during the car ride with a friend who shared her unfulfilled plans for suicide.

What do you say when words are inadequate? When people expect you to make things better but you are helpless to change them? I didn’t know. But I could see that it is not only illness, but isolation, that destroys people. Above all else, I decided to go into medicine to break the silence.

Although I may not be able to be my patients’ No. 1 confidante or their go-to for moral support, I want to be someone they can trust when all else fails, even when there is not a single thing I can do to cure them. Ultimately, that is the real side of life, and that is the real role I intend to play as a physician.

I want to be there when no one else is. And in those times, I will not remain silent. For I know that what they need to hear is simply, “I am here.” MM

Patrick Boland is a third-year medical student at the University of Minnesota who blogs at www.patrickjamesboland.com. He wrote this essay while pondering what can be done when medicine has no more to offer. “Where does that leave us as physicians? Where does that leave us as human beings?”

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Free Consultation:

jbarwick@whitecoatwealthadvisors.com
dbeattie@whitecoatwealthadvisors.com