

Perspective

A Mother's Grief

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She had one son. She raised him to be a respectful adult. At the age of 33 Sava was living his best life. Working, traveling, enjoying his evenings leisurely but always making time for his mother. His father died in his teen years and his mother remarried. He described a step-father who was loving and spent his time teaching him the piano. They were an affectionate trio.

Weeks before Sava's admission, he was experiencing some aches and pains. Thinking it was muscular in nature, he went to see a massage therapist a few times and his chiropractor to adjust his back but that didn't help much. His abdomen started to become distended and the pigment of his skin started to give off a yellowish shade, prompting him to visit his family doctor. This was followed by an emergency visit to his local hospital, which led to this admission and referrals to oncology and palliative care. The referral to palliative care was for symptom management initially.

My initial meeting with Sava was to address his nausea. He was found retching over a kidney basin, unable to keep any liquids down. Numerous investigations were ordered that day with a presumed diagnosis of pancreatic cancer upon presentation. I knew all too well that that wasn't going to be a favorable outcome based on previous experience. But for him- there was only optimism painted on his face. It was an awkward smile that greeted me in my opinion, which hid a sense of dread he didn't want to admit. That morning as I explained to him the role of palliative care he welcomed our involvement with hesitation. Next I preceded with an examination of his abdomen. He lifted up his t-shirt and uncovered an abdomen decorated with a few distinct tattoos. One was a Venetian Lion on the right upper quadrant which he was quite embarrassed about when I asked him about it. He said, "I did this one when I was younger." Then below it I recognized a 3-dimensional what I recognized byzantine Orthodox Church. In fact he was Serbian and Orthodox so

my instinct was correct. This one though was 3-dimensional and detailed about the size of my hand. The church has symmetrical arches, and domes topped with crosses. Once again I found myself curious about this tattoo too and I built up the courage to ask him what this one meant to him. Indeed, it was a Byzantine Orthodox Church of St. Sava in Serbia. He told me he was named after that saint and baptized in this church as an infant. In addition, he also wore his gold cross around his neck displaying his Christian belief. We spoke at length about his faith and every time I examined his belly I could not help but be more drawn to the image of the church. I found myself googling this church that evening. Here are some of the fun facts I learned: Saint Sava is a Serbian Orthodox church which sits on the Vračar plateau in Belgrade, Serbia. It's one of the largest Orthodox Christian churches in the entire world. There were many historical events that stalled the completion of this church and it was only finally completed in 2004. Saint Sava is regarded as the founder of Serbian medieval literature and is widely considered as one of the most important figures of Serbian history. He was also the first Patriarch of Serbia (1219-1233) and is an important Saint in the Serbian Orthodox Church.

His hopefulness was palpable with every visit. Telling me he's always praying and trusting in the Lord. Urgent, in-patient chemotherapy was given to this young man in hopes of a response. His mother and step-father were by his side each day with equal optimism. Unfortunately days after his chemo his blood counts dropped and he also had a gastrointestinal bleed that landed him in the intensive care unit. From there his condition continued to deteriorate. His mother never leaving his side. She slept in the chair next to him.

In a span of three weeks this young man was now at end-of-life. His condition changed so quickly from one complication to another in the intensive care unit. The cancer was so wide-

spread that all the medical interventions being provided were not helping. His mother was told he was dying and she was in disbelief. Throughout our time working with this patient and family it was not disclosed to the health care team that the patient's mother was a breast cancer survivor. Finding herself at the end of his life -all she wanted to do was give back to him. Show him the love and devotion he showed her when she was so unwell during her chemotherapy and radiation treatments. While sobbing and at times wailing she said *"he held my head over the toilet when I was vomiting and he laid beside me in bed when I was anxious through my radiation treatments. Now I want to hold him."* He died and she persisted to request to take his body home. She wanted to lay his still body on his own bed and hold him in her arms. She wanted to return the favor. Serbia mourning traditions include a wake in the deceased's home, where the body may lay up to three days before it is brought to the church for the funeral service. During the wake loved ones gather and can include a Psalter where the books of psalms are read aloud for all to partake in. It was not possible to release the deceased to his mother's home so she was given the space, privacy and time she needed to hold him in his hospital bed. Their own

priest came to the bedside to provide spiritual support to her as she didn't want any one from the health care team comforting her at the time. In fact she requested that palliative care leave upon arrival-closing the door to Sava's private room. She was clearly grieving and in fact quite angry. Was it directed at me for our service? The Lord? Herself for not being able to save him? It was several hours later before she came out of his room, looking withered by the horror she just lived through. There were no comforting words for this mother who was going to have to live with the death of her only son. A huge loss. I sit and wonder how will this mother move on? What will make life worth living after his death?

It's been several months since his passing and I still mourn Sava and he was not my son. Yet, I am a mother and so I think of Sava's mother. It's not just the young Sava I mourn, but all the mothers that have lost their young adult to cancer. The loss of young adults to cancer leaves me with a feeling of injustice. Is this how a mother's loyalty is repaid?

May your memory be eternal Sava!