

DEPARTMENT OF SURGERY

WEEK OF APRIL 20, 2020



This week, we focus on nature as a centering power in our lives. Spring is the season of renewal, and it is undeniable that the buds on the trees and songs of the birds after long New England winters spark new life in each of us. I have been heartened by the positive responses and eager contributions from so many in our department; there are so many voices (and great pictures) in this edition of our evolving newsletter. Enjoy the issue! --Katherine Bakke, MD PGY3

THE AWE IN THIS PLACE

"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul." - John Muir

Numerous studies have reported on the clinical benefits of nature: lowering blood pressure, treating depression and anxiety, helping alleviate ADHD symptoms, even promoting the creation of cells to help fight cancer. In the middle of the COVID19 pandemic, it is nature's majesty, wonder, and mystery that promotes another benefit: an increased sense of awe. Interestingly, there is a scientific basis to awe. Awe boosts immunity, fights inflammation, and lowers stress. Equally, and arguably more importantly, awe reminds us that there is something bigger than ourselves and helps us understand how forces around us influence all we do. Awe makes us slow down, live in the moment, and feel more connected to humanity and to the people around us.

Growing up, my family and I spent our time seeing the awe in the world. Our parents wanted us to succeed both in our education and more so, as people. We traveled throughout North America and Europe, climbed the pyramids throughout Mexico, camped throughout almost all states and many national parks, explored the wonders of the coral reefs, wondered at the beauty of the animals roaming free, and got lost on countless European roads seeking out new adventures. We learned about each other and about the people of this world. We learned to not take ourselves too seriously and to remember our priorities in life.

Last September, my father was diagnosed with small cell lung cancer, a cancer he never, as a healthy 69-year-old man and lifelong long non-smoker, should have had. A few hours later, my parents and I drove to start our family's cancer journey in Sequoia National Park. We experienced the most glorious of starry nights that first night. We spent the weekend exploring and seeing the majestic Sequoias, trees so grand they look unreal. Just as we saw the awe of the world's wonders both above and below the land growing up, we understood that this experience would be bigger ourselves.

The next week, the workup continued, and treatment started. The weekend of February 4, we took a surprise trip to swim at the base of the mountains in New Hampshire. The following weekend, my dad passed away suddenly but not before he saved his four children and 10 grandchildren in ways that are both physical and spiritual. I was reminded of this over the past weekend when the reddest of cardinals sat outside my window on a snow-covered tree on my son's 4th birthday. Our grief has not ended, there are still a lot of unknowns, and there is going to be a long year ahead. However, what we know for sure is that my dad--the consummate lover of nature--now gets to see the beauty and wonder of entire world in one view. There is nothing he would have wanted more.

I suspect most, if not all, of us occasionally forget to slow down, take a deep breath, and remember the priorities. It's easy enough to get caught up in the daily zooms, the uncertainty of how the week will look (? When am I going to be a hospitalist? A trauma surgeon? In an ICU?), the coordination and deliver of all of the information to the dozens awaiting it, the fear of getting



sick or making family members sick, and the anxiety of trying to somehow learn to teach our children while managing a full schedule.

Even in a pandemic, when we are pushed to limits in our professional lives in ways we have never encountered and likely will never encounter again, let us challenge ourselves to see the awe in everything around us: children laughing when you find a baby turtle on a walk, pet animals smelling the new grass (or for Dr. Williams, when the world's smallest parrot talks), chalk rainbows on the sidewalk walking into work, peepers at night, the stars in the night sky (including this week's meteor shower), the bees (thanks Dr. Simons!), the blooming flowers, or just the smiles of those people around us. Let us pause and appreciate how amazing it is that we have been given the privilege to play a small role—together—fighting hand in hand in what will prove to be one of the most challenging times in our history. Just think about where we were one month ago, and where we are now. Pretty amazing. We get one chance to live our lives. Today, choose awe, choose to live in the minute, and choose to go to sleep tonight after you have dedicated time to your true priorities. --Jennifer LaFemina, MD, Division of Surgical Oncology



A final challenge: I start and end each residency year with an activity. I ask the incoming residents and the outgoing chiefs to write down five things that must be done in the current week on one side of the card; on the other, they are asked to list five life priorities. Largely, the two sides of each card do not match up--a visual lesson in the discordance we often experience in our lives. Try it this week: challenge yourself to end your week making sure you cover both sides of the index card.

HUMMING ALONG

I stumbled into the hobby of beekeeping a few years ago; it is a long story, but my neighbor asked us to. Bees are commonly sold by the pound; a “package” of bees is about 2.5 lbs, corresponding to approximately 10,000 bees. A package includes both male bees (“drones”) and female bees (“workers”) and one queen to whom they all are loyal by virtue of a chemical



attraction to her pheromone. The familiar “buzz” of one bee takes on a different sound when multiplied by 10,000: It becomes a dull hum with a mesmerizing tranquility. The sound is a function of the vibrations produced by their tiny wings beating. It is amazing to me the way in which these sound waves join with such harmony rather than discordance.

The sound varies a bit and corresponds to the status of the hive. As soon as I open the lid on the hive, I have my first clue about whether or not the bees are happy (that is, have a healthy, egg-laying queen, have enough physical space, the right temperature and humidity in the hive, etc). I find my bees to be an absolute marvel in so many ways. For me, the many wonders of nature, with so many examples of simultaneous simplicity and complexity of systems and forces, brings so much joy. Give me a call if you ever want to come over and listen to my bees! Nature is amazing and soothing when you can take a moment to appreciate it. --Jessica Simons, MD, MPH;

Division of Vascular Surgery

PERSPECTIVES FROM A MASTER SURGEON

Dr Ulises Torres speaks frequently with residents about the steps he has taken throughout his career to better himself--be it outward thinking, modifying his teaching styles to help different learners, or practicing Krav Maga. Here, he reflects on lessons taken from a recent webinar hosted by Neil Pasricha, an advocate for honoring the happiness derived from simple pleasures.

After listening to Neil Parischa’s webinar last week, there were three main things I found excellent for these COVID times: The first one was the invitation to read a book, fiction to be specific, that can take you to travel to the moon with Jules or even wonder what's next with Poe. Yes, I am a movie kind of guy, but I have to admit that reading the Godfather was ten times better than the movie.

The second one was to pick a crazy hobby. If you have the opportunity to be home or have some downtime with no in-service examinations, STEP 3, or boards, try something new that will invigorate your mind and open a whole different part of your soul. In my case, I asked my oldest son to start teaching me how to play the guitar. Don't know how it is going to go, but I am up for

the challenge! Maybe you want to learn German, Russian, or how to bow and arrow (that might come handy if we run out of food soon!)--give it a try.

Lastly is taking the time to recognize how many positive things we still have. It was surprising to me that after a short period of introspection, you can rediscover how many things we can do to connect with ourselves and our loved ones, friends, or even just acquaintances. The three prompts Parischa uses to guide this daily reflection are: 1) Think of something that you would let go of. 2) Write something you are grateful for (and be specific). 3) Think of something you will focus on.

In regards to something you would let go of: The best example is your cell phone. Imagine all the moments you can live free without checking that annoying little box. Have you lost your phone lately and went out for groceries? It is liberating. Yes, there is a little panic at the beginning but then nothing but silence and tranquility because there is nothing you can do about it. We tried a "No Tech Tuesday" at my house this week. I played a board game with my four sons, and it was incredible how engaged they were, as well as the sense of community and family instead of the typical heads down into a screen that I usually get. Try it, especially if you do not do it often like me.

In regards to the second prompt, thinking of something for which you are grateful: The trick is to be specific. *I am grateful for the work my wife, Sara, is doing to take care of my four sons; it is incredible how she does it.* It helps me appreciate her efforts when I get home from a long call and think that only my work is tough and tiring.

Lastly, what to focus on? Neil recommends asking yourself this: *By the end of the day, what would make you the proudest today?* That action could be dedicating more time to your kids, making sure you say hi to everyone in the OR and getting a smile in return, or completing a hard day at work by collaborating with a team to save somebody's life. The sky is the limit. This action that would make you proud at the end of the day is what you should focus on in the moment of today. --Ulises Torres, MD; Division of Trauma and Surgical Critical Care

Additional resources and references:

- “The Science of Well Being” is a course given to psychology majors at Yale that now it's available to all in the science of happiness and the tools on how to apply the concepts. <https://www.coursera.org/learn/the-science-of-well-being>
- Neil Parischa’s podcast “3 Books” features interviews with a variety of personalities and experts on the most formative books in the world: <https://www.3books.co>
- And here is Parischa talking about simple ways to enhance one’s happiness: <https://youtu.be/rSG2JfOK8Uw>
- If you want a quick view of his story, here the link for Parischa’s TED talk, “The 3 A's of Awesome”: <https://youtu.be/uPE0G00XFV0>

STORIES FROM THE FRONT LINES

With a mix of eagerness and fear, I walked into my first shift in the COVID ICU last Monday. As the morning crew filed in prior to sign, I found a spot in the “fishbowl”, the glass office in 3

Lakeside ICU and waited for instructions. The team was recruited from all corners of the system: Internal and Emergency Medicine, Pulmonology, Cardiology, Surgery and two brave brand-new UMass Medical School MDs. Thirty patients were on our list. They ranged from 28-90 years old, one common diagnosis, almost all of them on a ventilator.

The role of the surgical back-up deployed to the ICU was as the same any other medical provider working there: essential and real. The days fly by between receiving new admissions, rounding on established patients, transferring COVID-negative patients to other units, discussing blood gasses and ventilator settings and sometimes minor procedures. The list continues with calling consults, completing death documentation, talking to families and going through long medically complex organ-system problem lists. Thankfully, we have the #SWAT, #FLIP and anesthesia teams as good allies who now offload the team from lines, proning patients and intubations.

Simple tasks of the day – like going to work, coming home, and entering a room to examine a patient- have now become a daunting production. A big portion of the day is consumed by balancing safety with paranoia. Donning and doffing hysterical layers of PPE, several outfit changes, and multiple showers a day. It is the fear of being ambushed by an invisible rival that hides behind doorknobs, desks or inanimate objects, waiting to turn us into part of the statistics. Meanwhile, we will continue to do our best in order to come home clean and, hopefully sleep through the night.

As surgeons, we take pride in acquiring information through what our senses perceive. We use this information to formulate plan and perform a standardized operation aiming for a predictable outcome. But when treating COVID patients, no standard or predictability exist in terms of diagnosis, treatment, or outcome. We fight an invisible enemy. One that displays no tympany, drainage or erythema, and rather leaves traces of persistent hypoxemia and ground-glass patterned roentgenograms along its path.

COVID has changed both the way we live and the way we die. In our job, we frequently work around life and death scenarios. But there is nothing more dispiriting than witnessing someone dying alone. My first of many deaths in the unit was a 58 y.o. man arriving in multiple organ-failure from sepsis and bilateral lung infiltrates. My job shortly after arrival, was not only to tell the family that his road had gotten to an end, but that, due to hospital lockdown, they would not be able to stand by his side in order to say goodbye. Feeling guilty and brokenhearted, I took my phone, walked into his room, and held it next to his immobile head, so his wife, daughters and brother could send their love and say goodbye. As you see, what make these days so hard it is not the physical aspect of the shifts. Neither is the challenge from being a rusty surgical resident stepping up as an intensivist substitute after a ventilator management crash course. It is the mental strain that fear, uncertainty, and disappointment can put in our minds weighing us down.

But not everything is grim. Quoting the movie “300,” “a Spartan's true strength is the warrior standing next to him.” And as duty called, this has become true for all of us healthcare workers standing up in the current desperate times. COVID is bringing us closer. There is a sense of comradery, even in a unit filled with strangers. We see this in acts of kindness such as donations of food, supplies, help with chores, and notes of support coming from the people around us. Covered with hats and masks, we have stood up together, honored our oath and continued to show up to work when needed the most. I do not know how long this is going to last, but I am hopeful that as long as we protect ourselves, listen to each other and support each other, we will be able to carry on until better times arrive. -- Jorge Lujan MD PGY4

PRAISES TO THE SUPPORT STAFF!

Dr. Hirsh quoted Leon Megginson in the last Wellbeing Newsletter: “It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.” I want to applaud our amazing admin team for all the change you have gone through this past month. You are still persevering while adapting to working from home, learning several new workflows, and serving as a source of comfort for patients. I am proud to be a part of this family and amazed by the great communication between the divisions. To those of you at home feeling guilty about not being on the frontline, remember, you are still contributing to everyone’s safety and working from home has definitely been more challenging than we thought. To those of you reporting to the office, thank you so much for your bravery every day.

Please make sure to take some time for yourself during the week: Turn off the news! Turn up your music and dance, meditate, go for a walk or send some positive affirmations to your coworkers. It is so easy to get caught up in the negativity surrounding this pandemic but try to give your body a rest as you need your immune system now more than ever and stress will definitely have an impact on it. –Samantha Johnson, Executive Administrative Assistant, Division of Thoracic Surgery



The Medical Assistants have always played a huge part in our tight knit family at 67 Belmont and since the pandemic they have been even more instrumental in keeping us safe. Without them, working from home full time would be impossible. Applause to the MAs of 67 Belmont: Eledny Paulino, Cheryl Ferriter, Heather Simpson (left to right).

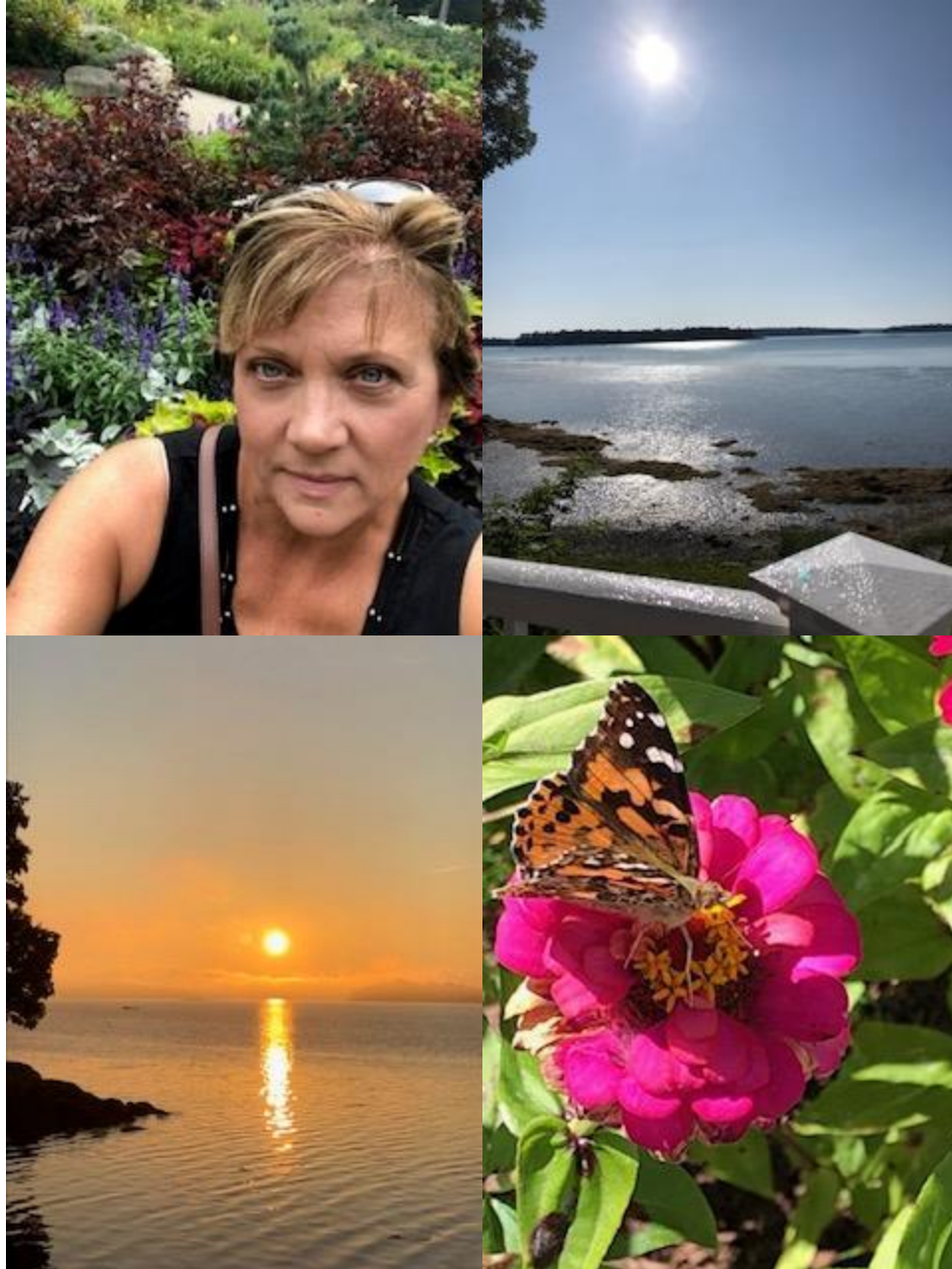
GET OUT THE MAP!



*New co-workers and a sunny office view.
Submitted by Melissa Lemanski,
Administrative Asst,
Division of PRS.*



Salim Munoz, MD PGY3 with his dogs Rex and Kiwi at Cascades Park in Worcester (left). Ricardo Bello, MD PGY3 and Katherine Bakke, MD PGY3 hiking at Carpenter Rocks, Wells State Park (above).



Photographs submitted by Jeanne Bigelow, Executive Assistant, Department of Surgery

Resources to Explore the Great Outdoors (including Outer Space!)

Virtually Tour a National Park

<https://www.nationalparks.org/connect/blog/take-virtual-visit-national-park>

<https://artsandculture.withgoogle.com/en-us/national-parks-service/parks>

Also, the National Park Foundation has Zoom backgrounds!

<https://www.nationalparks.org/support/digital-download-center>

Live Out Your Dream of Becoming an Astronaut!

NASA's free Space Center Houston app lets people explore virtual reality experiences, take astronaut selfies, and follow along through an audio tour of its educational space center.

<https://spacecenter.org/app/>

Chill Out With More Than Just Panda-Cam

The San Diego Zoo live stream of so many animals! <https://zoo.sandiegozoo.org/live-cams>

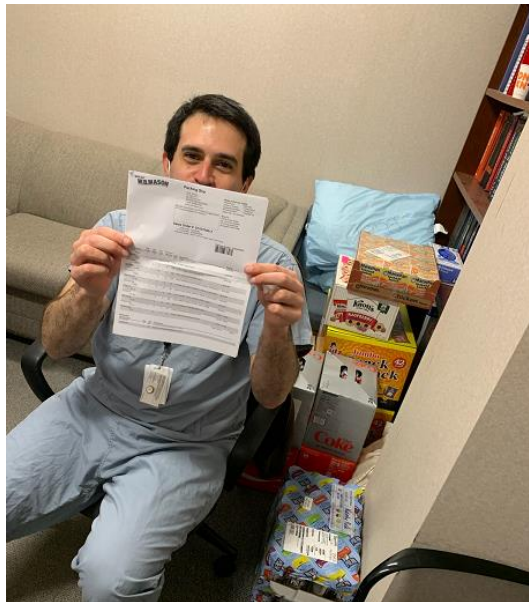
The Monterey Aquarium is giving visitors a way to zen out to jellyfish and watch penguins waddling in their habitat: <https://www.montereybayaquarium.org/animals/live-cams>

SHOUT OUTS & SNAPS

As we work through the pandemic surge, it is important that we recognize when good work is done. In that spirit, I want to pass forward the compliments that I am hearing regarding the work of Piyush Gupta and Jorge Lujan-Hernandez, who have been assigned to the Lakeside 3 COVID ICU. Drs. Kim Fisher and Will Wong, who are the attendings that supervise them directly, tell me that both residents have gone above and beyond to be helpful and have fully embraced the patient-centered and service-minded ethos that we are employing. The only disappointment they have is that these are not Medicine residents that we could keep permanently. You should be proud of them and the work they are doing this week. --Nicholas Smyrnios, MD; Medical Director, Medical Intensive Care Unit

I wanted to give you some positive feedback that the plastic surgery resident, Jorge Lujan Hernandez, who has been rotating in 3L-ICU has been a really positive addition to our team. He's totally stepped up to take care of MICU patients, which is obviously completely outside his usual scope of practice. Today he sutured a tongue lac and packed the mouth of a patient here. I hope this can be passed on to his residency director so he can be recognized for his contribution.

--Kim Fischer, Lakeside 3L-ICU Intensivist



For those at St. Vincent's Hospital, please don't forget we are thinking about you! While physically distant from those at the main campus, we appreciate the hard work you are doing holding down the St. V's fort! -- Xoxox, your Memorial and University Campus Resident Family

John Madore, MD PGY5 with a shipment of treats courtesy of Mary Cawley, general surgery residency program administrator and honorary residency mom. Photo courtesy of Rob McLoughlin, MD, PGY3.



Justin Maykel, MD, Chief of Colorectal Surgery, and survivor of COVID-19, donates plasma as part of research study using plasma to treat acutely ill COVID-19 patients. He was also interviewed by WCBV channel for the news about this opportunity for survivors to help the sickest patients. Study coordinated by Jonathan Gerber, MD, Division Chief of Hematology-Oncology. *Photo courtesy of Janet McDade, NP, Division of Colorectal Surgery.*

Dr. Hirsh may have made a career out of wearing different hats--pediatric surgeon, division chief, Worcester medical director, parody lyricist, bringer of the Dunkin Donuts, you name it. But are you ready to just ball your eyes out? The most important hat of all is "dad." Here is Dr. Hirsh hooding his daughter, Estee, at her virtual UMass Med School graduation.



WATCH: The Many Hats of Worcester's Medical Director, Dr. Michael Hirsh



COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The Arbinger institute is starting a four-part webinar series called *Working Outward: Igniting Growth in Change*. The first session will be Tuesday, April 21 at 1 pm EST. Mike Rener, who spoke at our Department of Surgery Grand Rounds, will be presenting “Shifting Sights: How Outward Mindset Creates Lasting Solutions.” According to Arbinger: “There is much that is new today--in our work roles, home environments, and global communities. How best admit this change can we identify and solve our most pressing issues?” In this session, Rener will be discussing how our mindset at work and at home can be the fundamental shift in understanding the true problems we're facing. He will be providing immediate takeaways to identify possible solutions and make crucial progress in our present situations. Future sessions will include:

4/22: Proactivity, Preparation, and Responsiveness: Insights on How to Move Forward

4/29: Distance or Disconnect? Coming Together When Your Team is Apart

4/30: The Five Pillars of Focus: Insights of a Navy SEAL

Registration can be found at:

https://zoom.us/webinar/register/7315871581166/WN_nsmvpoo2QBuYCYi4cHC1gg

Virtual Peer Support drop-in sessions are available to all caregivers to share their experiences and decompress with mutual support and understanding. Sessions will be offered: Monday to Friday, 8 to 8:30 am and 1 to 1:30 pm; Monday, Wednesday and Friday 5 to 5:30 pm. To access the sessions, log in to this Zoom meeting. <https://umassmed.zoom.us/j/108887416>

Caregiver Support Line: Caregivers seeking peer support, family services, mental health resources, spiritual care, help finding online wellness resources, or who just want to talk can call 508-334-HELP.

SUBMISSIONS

Next week's theme: **Food!** Contributions welcome from all of the members of our Department of Surgery. Please send your everyday hero highlights, front line (or even from home) perspectives, reflections, photos, ideas, ANYTHING, to Katherine Bakke or Dr Jennifer LaFemina.

