

Grace

By Oge Young, MD

Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

Grace was her name. She presented to my office as a new patient having bleeding well past menopause. She never saw doctors and only came to see me when her flow turned heavy. As suspected, her postmenopausal bleeding was a sign of uterine cancer. Fortunately, her cancer proved a low grade tumor. A simple hysterectomy provided sufficient treatment for her malignancy.

Surprisingly, Grace returned for follow up, and eventually, she decided to visit me for annual exams. Since graduating from high school, she had worked in housekeeping at a health care facility. She met her husband, John, there 40 years before. His job was in maintenance. They loved their work. They loved their life and each other. Their only disappointment was a barren marriage for many years. Her past menstrual history suggested that she had rarely ovulated. To her astonishment, one day at age forty, Grace experienced the “miracle” of pregnancy. Her antepartum course, labor and delivery were uncomplicated, bringing them a daughter, they named Madeline. She laughed at how much Madeline changed their lives, but added, “Never had they known such joy.”

Grace remembered Madeline’s first smile, her first words, her first steps- all those “firsts” to which we, as parents, hold on. She described those moments to me with the delight she knew at each of those milestones. She told me about the first birthday card Madeline made for her announcing, “For your birthday, I give you Me!” A birthday present to her mom at age 10 was simply, “My love for you,” her words written with a drawing on bright yellow paper. Grace had saved those gifts and much more.

Tragically, Madeline was killed shortly following her 12th birthday. Emile and Grace had set aside money all year to buy her a new bicycle. She had learned to ride on a neighbor’s hand me down. The new bike, shining pink and white with streamers at the ends of the handle bars, even had a bell to liven her ride. Usually quiet natured, she had jumped and jumped, and then screamed, when Emile opened the garage door revealing her birthday surprise.

Only a few days later, a car collided with the beautiful bicycle on which she rode. Madeline died instantly. Ironically, the dirt road in front of their home was rarely traveled. Coming around a bend near their yard, a young driver had not seen her. Knowing this final story, I struggled to understand how Grace could share so much about her daughter with laughter, her face aglow. As I held her chart each year before stepping into her room, it was hard for me to swallow.

Grace would be smiling, seemingly excited to see me for her exam. My habit was to ask patients about their children, many of whom I had delivered. Grace would be waiting for me to ask about Madeline. And, she would tell another wonderful memory, sounding as though she had saved it for just me. One

year, at the end of a story, I finally asked, how was she able to talk with such glee about Madeline, knowing that she was gone.

She grabbed my cheeks, lifted my sunken head and looked into my moist eyes; “Don’t be sad, Dr. Young. We had her for twelve glorious years, when we thought she would never come. I love her now as much as I loved her then, and nothing will ever take her from me.” Grace admitted she would never forget the sight of Madeline’s crumpled bicycle and her small broken body. Yet, over the years, her sadness had been replaced slowly by all the joy Madeline had brought her.

Grace has since died, but her grace is not forgotten.