

Leslie was a 36 year-old Dartmouth medical student when she took part in her first childbirth. We were working together during her third year Ob/Gyn Clerkship at Concord Hospital. Sitting at the edge of the bed with our patient pushing, she placed the flat of her hand over the baby's head, holding it back firmly to prevent tearing. Slowly a head emerged. With gentle downward traction, an anterior shoulder came out from underneath the pubic symphysis. Fluid poured from the corner of the baby's mouth as his chest was compressed by the birth canal. Then lifting the head, his posterior shoulder delivered keeping our patient's perineum intact.

Cries erupted with the baby's first breaths, the mom's instant relief and the dad's complete wonderment. Tears filled Leslie's eyes as she gathered the slippery, warm infant in her hands, umbilical cord still attached, and placed the baby on the bare chest of his mom. Almost immediately, his crying ceased, as he heard the heartbeat he had grown accustomed to for months in his mom's belly. The placenta delivered uneventfully.

Following what had been a typical long first labor, the father announced, "Finally it is over!" I whispered to Leslie, "It's just beginning..." The room quieted with joy. Leslie laughed, but with tears still soaking her cheeks. The couple seemed touched by her response to their birth.

As we walked to the nurse's station to write a brief delivery note, Leslie (not her real name) apologized for her uncontrollable tears. I assured her that I liked seeing students cry at a birth. I loved knowing that she was moved by that moment. I offered that the greatest joys in medicine are when we feel deeply connected to others. She paused, and then shared that her tears were surely of joy, but also of sadness. She was nearing the age of forty, unmarried, without a partner, facing 5-10 more years of training. She felt sad that she might never have the opportunity to birth her own child.

Leslie was the oldest of eight children from a struggling Black American family, the first in her extended family to attend college. At an Ivy League school, she was encouraged during her final year to attend 'corporate recruiting.' She would have been a desirable candidate, but instead, she chose a job in social work, knowing first hand the economic and racial disparities in impoverished communities. After ten years of frustration, disappointments and constant concerns about the funding of her program, Leslie decided to apply to medical school. Her decision was in part precipitated by the death of a young pregnant woman whose undiagnosed pre-eclampsia resulted in a cerebral hemorrhage.

Dartmouth Medical School awarded her a full scholarship. She was a mature, hardworking medical student, who, at the end of four years, matched in a highly regarded Ob/Gyn residency. Leslie was such an outstanding resident, she was offered the opportunities of a fellowship or to stay on the staff of her university program as a generalist. She elected to return to her community where she has eeked out a solo practice caring for underserved women. We have never lost touch. She has not married, but she is smothered by the love of her siblings, many nieces and nephews (some whom she delivered) and, of course, her patients.

A few years ago, she sent me a review article on "Vitrification," recent technology to preserve an older woman's fertility by harvesting her eggs when she is young, and then using them later to achieve pregnancy.

Attached to the paper was a note saying, "Hey, do you remember our conversation after my first delivery? Where was this when I needed it? Just kidding! I love my life." She thanked me for the six weeks of our Ob/Gyn clerkship, giving me credit for opening the door to her present life. I responded by sharing words that were once said to me. "There are times when a door is opened, but it is up to us to walk through it."

While new technology is exciting and our expanding fund of medical knowledge is gratifying, it is in our relationships with others - students, colleagues and our patients, that we find the 'soul of medicine.'