Family Medicine Moments
January 11, 2024

Introduction: Welcome back to FMM and welcome to 2024. Hoping this will be a very reflective year for you.

I want to start the year with an important piece from Anita Kostecki, who is a graduate of the Family Medicine Residency (FHCW) and a long-time faculty member who provides part time care at EMK. She has been thinking more about the passing of our colleague Jeff Satnick. She has captured her thoughts here on what he meant to her and her family, and also what he meant to our department, community and his patients. I am so glad she has done this. A void has occurred with his passing. I simply loved seeing him at medical gatherings for all that he stood for and the joy he brought to conversations I would have with him.

However, this is Anita’s reflection, and I won't distract. She included these thoughts in her email to me: [I wrote this reflection] both on my personal and family's responses to Jeff's passing as well as an attempt to highlight and honor the many unique and wonderful aspects of his life.

I was hoping by sharing my own experience of grief, that others may connect it to losses they have experienced and find it helpful in some way as they go forward in their lives as best they can after the death of a beloved friend or family member.
Por la madrugada (A Tribute to Jeff Satnick)

By Anita Kostecki

Immediate physical needs insert themselves into gray moments between a night’s sleep and the dawn’s awakening—full bladder, stiff arm from cat’s weight, cold nose, sore neck. Then perhaps fears arise of being too tired to face a long work shift or a struggling teen or another unhoused family. Breath in, setting intention on the present moment and routine propels me out of bed to begin another day.

The gut-wrenching sudden death of a beloved friend makes waking up a jarring re-entry into a world irrevocably different than before. Buddha teaches that change is expected, inevitable, but this reality feels like a cold slap in the face. Regaining consciousness means remembering again who is never coming back. Breath in, forced past the lump in my throat, heavy heart making lung expansion difficult, loss darkening the day before it begins.

Jeff Satnick became one of my husband Mike’s closest friends when their paths crossed as graduates of the UMass Family Medicine residency nearly 40 years ago. Working hard and playing harder, they shared many local and international adventures, especially during their bachelor years. I first only knew Jeff through Mike, but then he became my friend too. Jeff and his wife Jessica, along with our collective five children, were “chosen” family for many years thereafter. We celebrated holidays and birthday parties, camped in twin VW vans, jointly rented beach houses, hauled firewood to each other through snowstorms, and faced an untold array of life’s challenges together. Jeff was a brother to Mike and an uncle to my children; his death has infused our family with profound sorrow.

Dr. Satnick was a unique human and a highly-skilled integrative physician. In addition to allopathic medicine, he studied acupuncture, osteopathy, and learned about herbs and supplements to treat conditions that confound mainstream medicine including Lyme disease, unexplained fatigue, hormonal imbalance, and chronic pain.

In response to the news of his sudden passing, patients spoke of the tremendously positive impact Jeff made on their health, and how he helped them finally move forward in their lives. Striking was the way Jeff focused intensely on each encounter, and gave his patients the support and tools to guide their own recovery and achieve greater personal freedom. He gave the gift of his undivided attention and expertise to every patient who came to him seeking healing.

In the past weeks, Jeff’s family members and close friends have reflected how Jeff made them feel as if they were the most important, the most special and the most
beloved beings in his full circle. His humor, care, and connection with so many was extraordinary, and his willingness to go the extra mile was legendary.

To me, Jeff was the person who introduced me to motorcycle and convertible rides, welcomed me to Great Brook Valley Health Center* as a new doc, helped me bargain for my first real car, led the way up Princeton hikes with our faithful pups, witnessed Mike’s and my wedding, wept at my parents’ funerals, managed my gestational hypertension with needles, held my children close to his heart, and gave me the honor of sharing precious moments with him and Jess and Sam and Sophie. None of us feel ready to face a future where our memories will be made without Jeff in them.

I do know the world truly has become a smaller place without Dr Jeffrey Satnick. He lived a wide-open life on purpose, and enthusiastically carried the rest of us along for the ride. He whole-heartedly pursued passions that compelled him, both professionally and personally. Being part of his brief time on earth was a privilege that I didn’t believe I or others took for granted, but am now thinking we may have, not realizing the full power of his presence and energy in our lives until he was no longer with us.

Blinking open weary eyes the last couple weeks has become easier, as the shock of sudden loss naturally fades with time. Breath feels less tight, settling into this new and unwelcome normal, though still shallow, as if deepening it may force premature acceptance of Jeff’s death. I am not yet ready to embrace the Kibranesque vision of balancing profound sorrow with joy. Centering a daily practice to offer grace for continued mourning without losing vital memory is all I can do.

“The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.” (Elisabeth Kubler-Ross)

May it be so.

Thank you for listening, and please hold your loved ones close always.

*Ed. Note: Now Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center