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During the month of April, I was redeployed from an office-based practice to the inpatient COVID 19 unit at Hackensack University Medical Center. As with all local hospitals, an unprecedented number of patients were being admitted to the hospital daily with the same disease, and resources were quickly extended to their fullest capacity.

One of the things that I found different about COVID 19 is the isolating and at times unpredictable nature of this disease. We were learning more about this novel disease (and adjusting our way of treating patients) as we went along. All patients spent days confined to their hospital beds, hyperventilating, without visitors, unable to FaceTime their families, and uncertain about their futures. Every day we had to make some very difficult phone calls to families who could not be present with their loved ones to help them transition to the afterlife.

Despite the difficult circumstances, many of the patients were grateful for their care, which made it rewarding. I was privileged to collaborate with doctors, nurses, and medical assistants from other disciplines in the hospital. As a team, each of us contributed what we did best to help each patient.

One important factor which can't be understated is the support of others, especially the Armenian community. The prayers, emails, texts, phone calls, and goodies during those few weeks sustained me. I want to express my appreciation to the St Leon family for giving me strength. We are all in this together.

Sylva Takvorian

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When I first arrived to my designated location, I recall feeling that life was no longer going to be the same. I was reassigned by my hospital to work at a local nursing home and subacute rehab experiencing an epidemic of COVID-19 where ultimately 90% of the residents became infected, and more than half of its staff became ill from it. There were no visitors allowed, temperature checks were done daily at the door, and there was a pervasive smell of bleach and cleaners everywhere. The staff were dressed in a stifling attire of Tyvek suits in full PPE including face shields or goggles, gowns, double gloves and masks. Other than identifying coworkers from their eyes, you often could not tell who was who.

We were fighting a war against an infection we knew little about. As this virus was new, we did not know how to defeat it. Its clinical presentation is variable, how long one is contagious is unclear, and we had an unproven armamentarium of drugs to use. Oftentimes you could not predict who will die and who would survive. For a few weeks, I was overwhelmed by the unpredictable course of the disease watching stable patients crash unexpectedly, or keeping up with the volume of new cases and daily death counts. I had to reach out to families to give updates or condolences, and reassure them that everything possible was done for their loved

ones. I went into the profession of medicine to help people, and now felt powerless and ineffective. Every so often, an altruistic coworker would break down in tears of panic and paranoia, and I could only reassure them that we would get through this together and that this intense period will come to an end one day. I asked myself how I would get through this physically and emotionally. I had to discover a way to find comfort and peace in the midst of this turmoil and stress.

I recalled when my at the time nine-year-old daughter asked me a very perceptive question. “Mom, why do people have to die?” She wanted to know that if God was so good, then why would he let bad things happen to us? It took a few days for me to come up with an answer worthy of her question. She made me realize that in a world without pain and suffering, we would live our lives very differently. Imagine a life where no one was sick and there was no suffering, or things were effortless and pain-free. We would not be grateful for what we had because we would never have the awareness to see how lucky we were, nor appreciate the worth of our friends, families and health. My insightful child summed it up best: “So if bad things didn’t happen, we wouldn’t appreciate the good.” In a way, we express our gratitude in how we treat others and how we live our lives. By doing this, we bring value and significance to the lives of those we have lost. When things seemed impossible, I reminded myself of what I was grateful for. I have a healthy family and we were lucky to have food and shelter during a pandemic. I feel fortunate enough to have the support of my friends, family and coworkers who would constantly check in on me and ask if I needed anything.

I also found strength in the legacy of my ancestors. I am made of the same fabric of my Armenian ancestors who endured some of the worst tragedies in life. I am a descendent of survivors who were tenacious and came out stronger from their experiences. Resilience and adaptability do not come from living an easy life, but from pulling through life’s hardships. This experience, no matter how uncomfortable and painful would be meaningful and enduring.

In the end, there were fewer new cases and we started to identify those who recovered. Many lives were lost of patients who are close friends, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, children, husbands, wives and godparents to their loved ones. By God’s grace, my family and I are fortunate to be healthy. I eventually returned to my regular routine, appreciating my life and those around me even more. I now realize that this experience was one of the pivotal moments in my life that was valuable and would shape who I am. Life is so fragile and fleeting, and this was a reminder for me to stand back and appreciate its beauty.