

MIND TO MIND

*Creative writing that explores the abstract side
of our profession and our lives*

Carol Wiley Cassella, M.D., Editor

A Flash of Humanity

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I met him in a trauma bay in Afghanistan.
A pre-operative assessment needed to be done.
“Just washouts,” the surgeon answers.
As I approach, I can see the wounds.
Extremity penetrations mostly, some with mild bleeding.
I begin my questions – the OR personnel are waiting.

But something about him makes me pause.
“How were you hurt,” I say.
There is no blank on the pre-op for his reply.
He weaves his tale.
I listen. Spellbound.
A suicide bomber.
This soldier was part of a security detail.
From a distance, and in retrospect, he saw it coming.
The walking time bomb looked out of place.
His “spidey-sense” was tingling.
He started to scream, to warn others.
Too late.

A human being evaporated in a ball of flame before his eyes.
The subsequent smell was overpowering – nausea.
When the dust settled, friends and co-workers were dead.
Shrapnel from the explosion had penetrated his own body.
One, in particular, lodged but millimeters from his heart.
“You’re lucky” someone had already told him, unthinking.

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“I don’t feel lucky” he told me with choked voice.
Tears escape his eyes.
“If only I’d reacted sooner,” he whispers, “maybe this wouldn’t have happened.”
His eyes look to me to explain.
I cannot.

For none of my medical school mentors prepared me
To care for a patient maimed by an exploding human being.
How does this happen?
What can I say?
He grips my arm, needing reassurance.
“I’ll be with you through your entire surgery,” I say.
Satisfied, he looks away.
The pre-op continues.

This is no yellow-bellied wimp.
He’s tough. And disciplined. And a crack shot.
As I wheel his gurney back to the OR,
He tells me about his hometown. And his family.
And getting back to his job of being a soldier again.
But as I reflect, I’m left wondering
About the human species,
And the acts of which some are capable.
And find myself unable to articulate an explanation.