

## Opportunity for Great Joy by Jalees Rehman

I was about 12 years old when I found out that my grandfather was born on 12/12/12. If he were alive, he would be exactly 100 years old today. I found out about his birthday, when he came to stay with us in Munich for an eye surgery. He was a diabetic and had been experiencing deterioration in his vision. At that time, it was very difficult to find an eye surgeon in Pakistan who would be able to perform the surgery. My grandfather spoke many languages, such as Punjabi, Urdu, Persian, English, Arabic and some Sanskrit, but he could not speak German. His visit occurred during my school holidays, so I was designated to be his official translator for the doctor visits and his hospital stay.

On the afternoon before his surgery, we went to the hospital and I was filling out the registration forms, when I asked my grandfather about his birthday and he said 12/12/12. I was quite surprised to find out that he had such a wonderful combination of numbers, when the lady at the registration desk saw the date and asked me whether he was absolutely sure this was the correct date. I translated this for my grandfather and he smiled and said something along the lines of, "It is more or less the correct date. Nobody is exactly sure, but it is definitely very easy to remember". I knew that I was supposed to be a translator, but this required a bit more finesse than a straightforward translation. One cannot tell a German civil servant that a date is more or less correct. If we introduced uncertainty at this juncture, who knows what the consequences would be.

I therefore paraphrased my grandfather's response as, "Yes, it is absolutely correct!"

She then said, "Eine Schnapszahl!"

My grandfather wanted me to translate this, and I was again at a loss for words. Schnapszahl literally means Schnapsnumber and is a German expression for repeated digits, such as 33 or 555. The origin of the word probably lies in either the fact that a drunken person may have transient double vision or in a drinking game where one drinks Schnaps after reaching repeated digits when adding up numbers. I was not quite sure how to translate this into Urdu without having to go into the whole background of how German idioms often jokingly refer to alcohol.

I decided to translate her comment as "What a memorable date", and my grandfather nodded.

We were then seen by a medical resident who also pointed out the unique birthday.

His comment was "Darauf sollten wir einen trinken!", which is another German idiom and translates to „we should all have a drink to celebrate this“, but really just means

“Hooray!” or “Great!”

My grandfather wanted to know what the doctor had said and I was again in a quandary. Should I give him accurate translation and explain that this is just another German idiom and is not intended as a cultural insult to a Pakistani Muslim? Or should I just skip the whole alcohol bit? Translation between languages is tough enough, but translating and showing cultural sensitivity was more than I could handle. My Urdu was not very good to begin with, and all I could come up with the rather silly Urdu translation “It is an opportunity for great joy”. My grandfather gave me a puzzled look, but did not ask any questions.

\*\*\*\*\*

On the day after my grand-father’s eye surgery, the ophthalmologist and the residents came by for morning rounds. They removed his eye-patch, inspected the eye and told me that everything looked great. He just needed a few more days of recovery and would soon be able to go home. After putting the gauze and eye-patch back on, the doctors moved on to the next patient.

Once the doctors had completed rounds, I made the acquaintance of the head nurse. She seemed to think that the eye ward was her military regiment and was running it like a drill-sergeant. She walked into every room and ordered all the patients to get out of bed and walk to the common area. Only lazy people stayed in bed, she said. The best way to recuperate was to move about.

I told her that I did not think my grandfather was ready to get up.

“Did any doctor forbid him to get up?”

“No, not really”, I replied.

“If he has two legs, he can walk to the common room. If not, we will provide a wheelchair.”

“He just had surgery yesterday and needs to rest”, I protested and pointed to my grandfather’s eye-patch.

“Yesterday was yesterday and today is today!” was the response from the drill-sergeant.

This statement did not seem very profound to me and I was waiting for a further explanation, but the drill-sergeant had already moved on, ordering the patients from the neighboring rooms to get up.

My grandfather and I did not have much of a choice, so we joined the procession of one-eyed men who looked like retired, frail pirates. They were slowly shuffling out of their rooms towards the common area.

The common area consisted of chairs and sofas as well as a couple of tables. I sat down in a corner with my grandfather, and we started talking. He told me stories from his life, including vivid descriptions of how he and his friends proudly defied the British colonialists. My grandfather recited poems from the Gulistan of the Persian poet Saadi for me in Persian and translated them into Urdu. He wanted to know about German history and what I was learning at school. He asked me if I knew any poems by Goethe, because the Indian poet Iqbal had been such a great admirer of Goethe's poetry.

We talked for hours. Like most children, I did not realize how much I enjoyed the conversations. It was only years later when my grandfather passed away that I wished I had taken notes of my conversations with him. All I currently have are fragmented memories of our conversations, but I treasure these few fragments.

I then pulled out a tiny travel chess set that I had brought along, and we started playing chess. I knew that he had trouble distinguishing some of the pieces because of his eye surgery. I took advantage of his visual disability and won every game. During my conversations with my grandfather and our chess games, I noticed that some of the other men were staring at us. Perhaps they were irritated by having a child around. Maybe they did not like our continuous chatting or perhaps they just did not like us foreign-looking folks. I tried to ignore their stares, but they still made me quite uncomfortable.

On the next day, we went through the same procedure. Morning rounds, drill sergeant ordering everyone to the common area, conversations with my grandfather and our chess games. The stares of the other patients were now really bothering me. I was wondering whether I should walk up to one of the men and ask him whether they had a problem with me and my grandfather. Before I could muster the courage, one of the men got up and walked towards us. I was a bit worried, not knowing what the man was going to do or say to us.

"Can you ask your grandfather, if I can borrow you?"

"Borrow me?", I asked, taken aback.

"He gets to tell you all these stories and play chess with you for hours and hours, and I also want to have someone to talk to."

Once he had said that, another patient who was silently observing us chimed in and said that he would like to know if he could "borrow" me for a game of chess. I felt really stupid. The other patients who had been staring at me and my grandfather were not at all racist or angry towards us, they were simply envious of the fact that my grandfather had someone who would listen to him.

I tried to translate this for my grandfather, but I did not know how to translate "borrow". My grandfather smiled and understood immediately what the men wanted, and told me that I should talk to as many of the patients as possible. He told me that the opportunity to listen to others was a mutual blessing, both for the narrator as well as the listener.

On that day and the next few days that my grandfather spent in the hospital, I spoke to many of the men and listened to their stories about their lives, their health, their work and even stories about World War 2 and life in post-war Germany. I also remember how I agreed to play chess, but when I pulled out my puny little travel chess set, my opponent

laughed and brought a huge chess set from a cupboard in the common area. He beat me and so did my grandfather who then also played chess with me on this giant-size chess board which obliterated the visual advantage that my travel set had offered.

\*\*\*\*\*

Since that time I spent with my grandfather and the other patients on the eye ward, I have associated medicine with narration. All humans want to be narrators, but many have difficulties finding listeners. Illness is often a time of vulnerability and loneliness. Narrating stories during this time of vulnerability is a way to connect to fellow human beings, which helps overcome the loneliness. The listeners can be family members, friends or even strangers. Unfortunately, many people who are ill do not have access to family members or friends who are willing to listen. This is the reason why healthcare professionals such as nurses or physicians can serve a very important role. We listen to patients so that we can obtain clues about their health, searching for symptoms that can lead to a diagnosis. However, sometimes the process of listening itself can be therapeutic in the sense that it provides comfort to the patient.

Even though I mostly work as a cell biologist, I still devote some time to the practice of medicine. What I like about being a physician is the opportunity to listen to patients or their family members. I prescribe all the necessary medications and tests according to the cardiology guidelines, but I have noticed that my listening to the patients and giving them an opportunity to narrate their story provides an immediate relief.

It is an indeed an “an opportunity for great joy”, when the patient experiences the joy of having an audience and the healthcare provider experiences the joy of connecting with the patient. I have often wondered whether there is any good surrogate for listening to the patient. Medicine is moving towards reducing face-to-face time between healthcare providers and patients in order to cut costs or maximize profits. The telemedicine approach in which patients are assessed by physicians who are in other geographic locations is gaining ground. Patients now often fill out checklists about their history instead of narrating it to the physicians or nurses. All of these developments are reducing the opportunity for the narrator-listener interaction between patients and healthcare providers. However, social networks, blogs and online discussion groups may provide patients the opportunities to narrate their stories (those directly related to their health as well as other stories) and find an audience. I personally prefer the old-fashioned style of narration. The listener can give instant feedback and the facial expressions and subtle nuances can help reassure the narrator. The key is to respect the narrative process in medicine and to help the patients find ways to narrate their stories in a manner that they are comfortable with.