

Purpose

Samuel Wade Ross, MD, MPH
and **Peter E. Fischer, MD, MS, Charlotte, North Carolina**

I could see it in his eyes. The utter fear of what was happening. I'm sure I mirrored it in my own... because he looked just like my son. Blue eyed, shaggy blond hair, just his same height. A toddler who should be playing at home, not dying before my eyes in the trauma bay. It was the type of tragic story you see on a television show. A kid's third birthday, traveling to his own birthday party, and the car breaks down. He is on the side of the road, walking to his parents' other car when fate... destiny... misfortune... whatever cruel force of nature or gods brought a car directly into his path, on the side of the road, in that tiny window of time and place where he was the most vulnerable.

We moved, despair mixed with a razor sharp focus. I feel helpless but know I am not. The responsibility is on my shoulders, death or life, make the right choice. Keep going. Airway placed. He's hypotensive and FAST [Focused Assessment with Sonography in Trauma] positive. An open frontal skull fracture. I have to move faster; we have to get to the OR [operating room]. I pause... I pray... and I think of all the moments, he has yet to live. Getting tucked in at night with his parents. His father reading him a story. The look of wonder mixed with sleepiness. Learning to ride a bike. The electric joy of his first kiss. Graduating high school. Making his mark on the world. The ever branching web of influence he has... will have... on a countless number of lives. And then those strands that touch so many, are cut, never actually being made. And in its place is left a void, a chasm of unfulfilled hope, unmade memories, bonds broken, dreams laid fallow, the potential of this life and all its commiserate promise... just evaporate. I want to look away from that dark vision, the abject terror of it and its reflection onto my own son's future, but I can't. Instead, I drink it in to drive me forward, to fuel my fervor, guide my hands, to give me purpose... to give my life, in this moment, *a purpose*.

Doors open, and all eyes and ears are on us. Everyone doing their role, playing their part, practiced, like a ritual rite of prayer. And we are praying, we are hoping and wishing; every heart and mind lock step in this one need: let him live, make him better. A singular clarity of focus and resolve revolve around him. Prep. Pray. Drapes. Pray. Knife. Pray. Spleen out... Amen. The neurosurgeon takes over as I strip off my gloves, gown, mask, and finally take a breath. He is stable, he is going to live for now, but what kind of life? His brain injury is severe, and a bifrontal craniectomy is performed. Will he wake, think, talk, walk again... will he be a little boy again? Doubt begins to creep into my mind, but hope and time is what is required now. Hope and time that we have given him and his family.

Flash forward a month, and as much as I try to keep up with this boy, I lost his progress in the shuffle of the daily work, the new patients, and all the old responsibilities. I am on off service and run into the pediatric intensivists in the hall. "How's the boy with the brain injury doing..." "Oh, I am sorry he died," he says. The lights dim, hallway darkens, and I thank him but inwardly hating him and myself. Yet, another day ruined with the impotence of a fate unchanged. So I look back to see what we could have done, and my whole day, week, residency is made right. He's not dead. He is very much alive and recovering in rehab. I go see him and my heart is uplifted because he is *alive*. Not just in the basic meaning of the word, but he is talking, and walking with help, and being a little boy again. Innocence tarnished but not shattered, still with problems, not made whole, but able to grow, able to improve. His mother and father smile with joy that only a child can bring, still able to hug them, still able to love and learn, and have a whole life with all its promise and opportunities ripe for the choosing.

Published online: January 21, 2016.

From the Division of Acute Care Surgery, Department of Surgery, Carolinas Medical Center, Charlotte, North Carolina.

This article was the first place winner of the Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma Oriens Award resident essay contest on "Why I want a career in trauma and acute care surgery."

Presented at the 29th annual meeting of the Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma, January 14, 2016, in San Antonio, Texas.

Address for reprints: Peter E. Fischer, MD, MS, Division of Acute Care Surgery, Department of Surgery, Carolinas Medical Center, 1000 Blythe Blvd, MEB, Suite 600, Charlotte, NC 28203; email: Peter.Fischer@carolinashealthcare.org.

DOI: 10.1097/TA.0000000000000967

J Trauma Acute Care Surg
Volume 81, Number 1

His smile was worth it all. As gut-wrenching as that day was when he came under my care, this face, who could have been a twin for my own son, was unquestioningly worth the extra years of school, the long hours, the hardships of residency, and too few moments with my own family. The feelings of his future slipping through my fingers, terror, despair, doubt, grief... were replaced with renewed faith. New memories, promises fulfilled, friends made and loves kindled, dreams pursued, and a family made whole, replaced the void that would have been his life cut short. Not just for him, but for every person he will ever touch and influence, every relationship,

every deed and accomplishment, whether revolutionary or as simple as a kind word, rippling forever out into humanity. Because he has a chance to be a boy, a man, a son, a husband, he has a chance to give his life purpose. And that... the crux of that hope... defying injury and preventing death before a life is fulfilled... is what feeds my soul... *it's what gives my life a purpose...* it's what makes me a trauma surgeon.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.