Driveway Moments and Decoy Stories: Moral Injury in Medicine

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“For there may be no answer

and you will know too little again

or there will be an answer and you will know too much forever”.

John Stone, M.D. 1

In this age of podcasts and curated internet radio, most of us have experienced a “driveway moment.” A term coined by NPR (National Public Radio), these occur when the story you are listening to is so compelling that you linger in your car to hear the conclusion. I have savored many driveway moments, but only one prompted a personal realization.

In “Act Two: The Real Decoy” from the podcast This American Life, Michael Pitre describes the evolution of a coping mechanism perfected after multiple tours in Iraq. Uncomfortable answering probing questions, Pitre developed the tactic of pivoting to prepackaged humorous anecdotes, such as recalling the escapades of the platoon’s pet scorpion Fred. His “greatest hits” guaranteed a laugh and were preferred to serious insights, such as the impossible choice a nighttime scorpion sting created for local families: violating curfew or watching their child die.
One night, a close friend made a flippant comment about the casualties of the Iraqi war. Incensed by his friend’s lack of regard for the loss of American and Iraqi lives, Pitre lost his temper. After his outburst, Pitre recognized that if he had been honest about his fear and grief, his loved ones would have approached him with the respect his service deserved. His decoy stories were both a symptom and the cause of his sense of isolation.²

That night in my driveway, I had my own moment of clarity. Like many physicians, I can find the shift to home life difficult. I realized that when I am unable to shed the burden of a grim day, I buffer myself and protect the psyche of my loved ones by deploying my own decoy stories.

When people learn you work in pediatrics, the impression that they have met a “carefree baby doctor” brings a certain light to their eyes. Few things snuff out that glimmer like hearing the additional words that summate my job; “neurologist”, “epilepsy” and “pediatric intensive care unit”. Luckily, in pediatrics, we have access to a never-ending arsenal of HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) compliant decoy stories. Chuckling over dinner that my patient quit track and field because he has “couch legs” is preferable to seeing my grief reflected in my family’s eyes. Thus, I refrain from reviewing my heart-wrenching discussion with the father who found his two-year-old floating, lifeless, in his neighbor’s pool. Recounting a mother’s refusal of a video telehealth visit because she “was not going to put on a bra today” will keep any
conversation rolling. It also starkly contrasts the suffering I would cause my loved ones if I recapped the anguish of a family care conference detailing the devastating injuries mom’s boyfriend inflicted on her 4-month-old while she was getting groceries. *

Decoy stories are only one expression of the psychosocial impact of distressing events. Over the past decade, a new concept has emerged known as moral injury.  

3 Occurring when there is a betrayal of what is believed to be right, by an authority or oneself in a high stakes situation, moral injury has overlapping features but is distinct from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).  

4, 5 Broadly, PTSD is triggered by the physiologic responses to stressful events, as opposed to the psychologic struggles of “reconciling the gap between what happened with what should have happened” that leads to moral injury.  

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From a medical perspective, the discussions of moral injury by Litz et al 8 and elaborated by Murray and Gidawani 5 are the most poignant. They contend that moral injury may occur when physicians fail to prevent harm or witness firsthand the trauma and acts of violence of humans towards each other. Physicians suffering from moral injury may experience psychological and mood concerns and a sense of isolation that can be followed by social and work issues.  

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Recognition and understanding of moral injury, established in the military with a validated screening tool, 9 is resonating throughout medicine with calls for research,
medicine specific screening tools and preemptive measures. 7, 10, 11 Management recommendations overlap with those for PTSD and burnout, ideally serving to remind morally injured physicians of their purpose, and that others may be experiencing similar challenges. 12

Following my driveway moment, I have started to approach transitioning from work to life with the operations center mantra recalled by Pitre: “What do I know, who needs to know it, and have I told them”. 2 Some days, it is helpful to admit to my loved ones that work is weighing on me. However, when my 4 year old daughter innocently inquires if I “gave the babies their pacifiers so they didn’t cry,” it is enough to simply reassure her that I also swaddled them in blankets. I have come to appreciate that decoy stories are not solely a diversion. Aptly timed, they can spark and share joy, and serve as a personal reminder of my love of humanity and medicine.

“The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head.”

Sir William Osler, M.D. 13

*Details of these sadly common stories have been changed to protect patient privacy

References:
2. Foo S. This American Life. In: Glass I, ed. The Real Decoy. December 2 ed: This American Life - Podcast Feed, 2016


