

LIFE IN PRACTICE

A series of personal perspectives on working in private practice and learning through the practice of life.

CHess MOVES OF THE HEART

Bonnie Straka, MD
Dermatology

I TRAVELED TO CHINA IN 2007 for two reasons: to adopt Noelle, our fifth child, and to participate in a medical mission trip at Shanghai Children's Hospital. My husband stayed home with our younger children, and I was accompanied by our older two. Three-year-old Noelle was waiting for us in northern China in a foster home, her fourth placement since being abandoned around age 2. We knew she couldn't walk, but nobody seemed to know why. We had few medical facts and even less information about what trauma she might have suffered from her disrupted attachments.

The first day of the trip at the hospital was filled with babies and children suffering from a variety of skin diseases. As I was finishing with my dermatology patients, the surgical teams were conducting preop assessments for the next day's cleft surgeries. I was asked to evaluate a 5-year-old girl who had numerous large protuberant tumors on her head, face, neck and trunk. Her skin was covered with a variety of pigmented lesions that, in combination with the tumors, strongly suggested neurofibromatosis. I found her beautiful. There was a sweetness, a trustiness, about her that defied her recent abandonment. She started following me around, and I started holding her hand.

I was told that a Chinese neurosurgeon was going to operate on her the next day and that he had requested my presence during her surgery. I had no idea why, and that made me feel anxious. I like to plan things, to be prepared. In my thinking, I'm often five or six chess moves ahead in any kind of problem-solving situation, and sometimes I even try to anticipate a seventh or eighth, just in case. Perhaps this internal game, which seems to happen automatically without needing permission from my conscious mind, gives me a sense of control—a feeling that if things go awry, there are many other chess moves and options that can happen almost seamlessly without invoking fear, panic or a sensation of chaotic surprise.

But what to do when there are no good chess moves? During the little girl's surgery, I hid behind a formation of nurses. I wasn't sure I had performed the all-important surgical scrub correctly even to earn my way into the operating room. I cringed when the surgeon drew a huge ellipse across the little girl's scalp,



Bonnie Straka holding her precious daughter, Noelle.



Dr. Bonnie Straka smiles, surrounded by her family.

encompassing the entire top of her newly shaved head. I had imagined a small incision for a biopsy specimen. But he delved through the soft-tissue tumor, layer after layer, and then down into the skull itself. The little girl slept on.

Finally, the surgeon looked up, pointed at me, pointed at the little girl, turned away from the team and walked out of the OR. The nurses created an opening for me to advance to the child's side, but I was frozen, fixed to the spot where I had been observing the surgery for the past few hours. It was clear that the expectation was for me to complete the surgical procedure by closing the gaping wound. But my body wouldn't move. In my 20 years of practicing dermatology, I had never attempted to close a wound so large and so deep. I felt panic but could no more run out of the OR than I could approach the little girl.

A nurse pointed to a tray with a selection of sutures, almost as if they were an assortment of exotic teabags. All the writing was in Chinese. Another nurse held up a surgical instrument, as if beckoning me closer. Maybe she thought that if I recognized a needle holder, then everything else would fall into place.

I was petrified. What if I couldn't close the wound? What if I FAILED? What if I let the little girl down and somehow harmed her? I felt my own fear, recognized the echoes of my own insecurity as a doctor, as a wife and mother, as a little girl who wanted to be perfect to earn love, and as an adult who has learned that perfection is rarely possible. I had no chess moves. Not even one.

In this moment as I experienced my dearth, as I judged myself for not doing enough, for not being

enough, God reminded me that He is. Enough. That when I run out of my own chess moves, that He can do something better. That the goal is not perfection, but trust.

I can try, I thought. I can try.

The lowly pawn bravely stepped forward.

I closed her wound as best I could. I prayed the entire time. I counted on the nurses, my Chinese teammates, to offer me up the correct suture for each layer.

We can try. We can all try.

I continued to think of the little girl long after I

left Shanghai. I prayed that her sutures would hold, that someone would love her and hold her hand, that she would someday find a forever family. That she would know, somehow, that she mattered to me, that she was precious, that her trust was a gift.

And Noelle? I didn't know that she would fill broken places in my heart with her sweet spirit. I didn't know she would be so beautiful, wise, kind and brave. I'm glad I didn't have any advanced chess moves in my repertoire, that I didn't let fear of the unknown keep me from scooping her up in my arms and trusting that love would be enough. ■



Bonnie Straka, MD

Dermatology

Bonnie is the president, founder and medical director of Albemarle Dermatology Associates & Signature Medical Spa. A board-certified dermatologist serving medical, surgical and aesthetic patients in Charlottesville since 1991, she is a member of the American Academy of Dermatology, the Medical Society of Virginia and the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery. A summa cum laude graduate of Williams College, she earned her medical degree from the University of Connecticut. She trained as a resident in dermatology at the University of Virginia, where she also serves as an adjunct clinical assistant professor of dermatology.

Beyond her work at ADA/SMS, Bonnie is the international consulting dermatologist for Love Without Boundaries, an organization dedicated to providing desperately needed medical care to orphans and medically fragile children in Asia and Africa. She is the wife of crime novelist Andy Straka, mom to Chris, Kelci, Lily, Aimee, Noelle and Luke, and "Grammy" to little Wilder. A master scuba diver, she also enjoys hiking, classical music, reading and anything chocolate.