

My Daddy Was a Doctor

Logan C. Jones, MDiv

Raleigh, North Carolina

My daddy was a family practitioner in King, North Carolina, for over 38 years. He delivered babies, gave free sports physicals for teenagers, helped start a hospice, made rounds at the Stokes-Reynolds Memorial Hospital, and took Thursdays off and worked a half day on Saturdays. And he made housecalls.

Dad drove a Corvair for many years around the roads of Stokes and Surry counties. There were times when he would call on elderly patients—whether they needed it or not. As a young boy, I rode with him on many of these visits, and he would let me carry his worn black bag into the house. There he would pull out the mysterious tools of doctoring, like the blood pressure cuff, the stethoscope, and maybe the rubber hammer to check reflexes. Then he would send me out to play, or climb a tree, or sit on the front porch with an RC cola and a moon pie.

I remember phone calls in the middle of the night. I could imagine the conversation, "Doc, I think I done went and broke my arm. It hurts real bad."

"Well, John," I would hear him say. "Calm down. There's nothing I can do about it tonight. You need to get yourself on over to the emergency room and have it x-rayed."

"You're right, Doc. Thanks. Sorry to bother you."

We could always count on the phone calls on Sunday afternoon around 4 or 5 o'clock, "Doc, I've had a sore throat for about 4 days now. I was wondering if you could take a look at it. I've got to go to work tomorrow." Dad would say OK, and soon the doorbell would ring. Billy Ray would come in and they would go into the study. They would walk out a little while later and Billy Ray would reach for his wallet.

"What do I owe you, Doc?"

"Nothing. You take these samples and then get that prescription filled. Call me if this isn't better in a couple of days."

Dad was well loved by our community. At harvest time, we would find vegetables at our back door: green beans, corn, squash, peas, cucumbers, and tomatoes. Watermelons would sit in the shade—thousands of them, it seemed. We never knew who brought all these gifts, they

ajust appeared. Christmas brought mason jars of white lightning moonshine for that special blend of eggnog.

The health care crisis today is not so much about how much everything costs as it is the lack of doctors who practice primary care medicine. It is the fear of nameless, faceless physicians: we are supposed to trust them, yet they do not even know who we are. The language of managed care—HMOs, PPOs, alliances, copayments—has replaced what I heard my daddy say many times as he went into the examining room, "Hell, boy. What are you doing here? You're not sick, are you?"

What ensued in that room was beyond me. He listened to his patients. They talked. They laughed. I suspect they cried at times, too. Whatever it was, healing took place there behind the closed door—a different kind of healing. Dad often described his practice as serving "the walking sick and the worried well." Of course, he sometimes made referrals to the specialists and subspecialists in Winston-Salem when needed, but often, what his patients needed more was the simple act of caring, the laughter, the jokes, the slaps on the back. He said more than once that medicine cannot always cure, but it can always care.

Often, I would stop by his office on my way home from college. Dad's response to my asking if he was busy was always, "No." Dad was never *too* busy. He would talk to me for a while, ask me about school or whatever. Then he would twirl his stethoscope around his fingers and go into another room. There would be a burst of laughter and it would start all over again.

My dad died in 1990 of a heart attack. His heart just gave out. I guess it was a good way to die since he had been giving his heart to all his patients for many, many years. Then the community cared for my family. The harvest continued. One side of the sign outside the Burger King read, "We Will Miss You, Dr. Jones." On the other was "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Kids' Meals." At the funeral home, I heard stories about how, on his housecalls, Dad would trim the toenails of his elderly patients who could not do it themselves, how he would send birthday cards to them. Others retold some of his favorite jokes. There was one about a whistle; Dad would always laugh until he cried whenever he told that one.

I am a chaplain in a hospital now. My dad never taught me how to work on a car or fix a leaking faucet. But he did teach me how to make a housecall.

In this era of managed care, my dad managed to care. There is a difference.

From the Department of Pastoral Care, Rex Healthcare, Raleigh, North Carolina. Address correspondence to Logan C. Jones, MDiv, Department of Pastoral Care, Rex Healthcare, 4420 Lake Boone Trail, Raleigh, NC 27607.