

Holding On in the ICU: How a Stuffed Giraffe Became Part of Healing



THE OBJECT

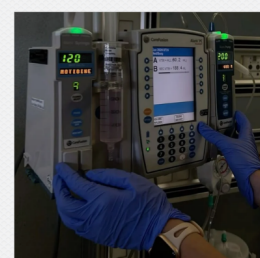
When I was admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) with septic shock, my father gave me a stuffed giraffe. In the midst of all the beeping machines, procedure, needles, and tubes, the giraffe stood out as the only thing that seemed “human” and familiar. In the field of medical anthropology, the focus is not only on the biological nature of disease, but how they are perceived through relationships, fear, caring, and everyday meaning-making (Hardon, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Medical Anthropology*). At the time, the giraffe had been a source of solace for me but now it carries a whole new layer of meaning after losing my aunt to sepsis a few weeks ago. This giraffe links survival, grief, and family memory. This uses an anthropological lens to analyze how a material object can become part of illness experience, healing, and cultural expressions of care

ILLNESS

Septic shock is a life-threatening condition that arises acutely and requires immediate medical attention. It so often leads to organ failure and death with a 50% mortality rate. However, illness is not just about the physical aspects but also the social and emotional. Finding out that I was battling with sepsis brought on so much fear, confusion and ultimately a loss of control over my own body. Medical anthropology is based on the idea that illness is socially constituted in terms of its context and experience rather than its medical aspects (Hardon, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Medical Anthropology*; Kleinman, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*.) The giraffe has become significant in redefining this life-threatening encounter in the ICU from being purely medical to being more related to personhood.

CULTURE OF CARING

This giraffe was a physical embodiment of care as it symbolized the physical presence of my parents, when they could not be in the room with me. This demonstrates that being cared for not only comes from medical practitioners but also from the relationships and practices established by family. The action of my father bringing me the giraffe is an example of how his care for me was communicated through a tangible item rather than verbalizations. According to the medical anthropology literature, care is socially constructed and maintained via relationships, presence and emotional support (Hardon, Manderson & Cartwright, 2014). *The Socialities of HIV* puts a focus on the true importance of care and its relationship to health and well-being by arguing that healing is often facilitated by relationships and care rather than by biomedical practices alone (Hardon, Manderson & Cartwright).



A MEMOIR

This giraffe has had a vastly important meaning to me beyond my ICU experience. It has connected survival, care and loss. Medical anthropology argues that illness is not just an event but has far-reaching consequences. Its emotional and social effects linger and influence memory as well as identity. My survival from septic shock and subsequent loss of my aunt to sepsis have given the giraffe multiple meanings of vulnerability and resilience. As *Changing Childhoods* noted, people rely on their relationships and significant objects to assert their personhood through illness and recovery. This giraffe connects my illness to family care and memory. It illustrates that recovery is an ongoing and relational process, not merely an event or medical outcome (Manderson, “Changing Childhoods,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Medical Anthropology*).

CULTURE OF HEALING

Looking at healing from a medical anthropology point of view, it is not just the physical recuperation or success in medical management of the illness. Rather, healing is an ongoing process where the individuals face fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability. In an ICU setting, healing is clearly not immediate despite having medical help to treat or cure conditions. Moments of emotional grounding in an overstimulating environment is also healing. As described in *A Cold of the Soul*, emotional pain can be better managed when thought of in a way that promotes rest, coping, and feelings of support (Kitanaka, “A Cold of the Soul,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Medical Anthropology*.) The stuffed giraffe was part of that healing process, providing me with comfort and familiarity to promote emotional stability in conjunction with medical interventions (Manderson, Cartwright & Hardon, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Medical Anthropology*).

References

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