



Illustration by Jim M'Guinness

The thing that tethers

John Wagner

Mr. Wagner (AQA, Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, 2019) is a fourth-year medical student at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

With his birdhouse perched on a nearby window sill, Ray slept. He'd never boast, but that birdhouse was a real masterpiece.

"Every day is a gift," he said at a previous visit. "So many blessings."

I placed his paintbrush apparatus, mouthpiece attached, on his bedside table and began to open his cardboard box of acrylic craft paints. My thoughts turned to an Emily Dickinson poem:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—¹

Light bounced off the standing rack of army caps to Ray's right. White noise occupied the room from his

grainy ten-inch TV. A handful of picture frames hung near the foot of his bed.

Slowly, Ray stirred, twisted his torso, and opened his eyes. "Oh good, you're here." He flashed a smile. "Martha mentioned you were coming."

"I've got all the materials, Ray. You up for it?" He asked me to turn off the TV so we could get to painting.

Martha, a recreation therapist on the unit, had created Ray's specialized painting device to enable him to do something he loved. During my initial visit three years earlier, she shared with me his first project idea—a small wooden birdhouse.

Ray would often spend the whole visit painting just one of the house's walls, not leaving a speck of that side untouched. When his artistic vision called for it, I switched out brushes for him. The apparatus required that he bite down on a mouthpiece, and each brush stroke took considerable effort. I watched in amazement, reflecting on how differently this felt compared with sitting in lecture halls. Only an aging barbed wire fence separated the medical school from the VA, but Ray's patient room could have been in another state.

I visited Ray about once a month through Veteran Health Partners (VHP), an organization I co-founded during my first year of medical school at Loyola. VHP pairs medical students with veterans who are experiencing paralysis or have other disabilities and are receiving long term care. The mission is mutually beneficial, with a key emphasis on sharing perspectives through open conversation. After each of my visits with Ray, I left nourished, a better version of myself.

Just as we were all set up for Ray to begin painting, a team of nurses appeared in the doorway. They needed to measure blood glucose, wash him, and change his clothes. While they tended to him, I stepped outside.

Springsteen's voice echoed from a 1990s era boom box at the nursing station. I paced near the vending machines adjacent to Ray's room. Thirty minutes passed. The books were calling. Should I reschedule?

The door opened, and a few members of Ray's care team emerged. He trailed not far behind in his wheelchair, sporting a fresh new hoody and sweatpants.

"Thanks for your patience," one of the nurses said. "Ray's latest project might have to wait until next time—his lunch is ready. Perhaps you can help with feeding him instead?"

We made our way to the cafeteria. The automatic doors opened, and we found Ray's tray at the table. I draped a plaid bib across his shoulders and asked him what he wanted to eat.

"Green beans. Then the chicken noodle soup. We'll see if I have room for the burger," he replied.

Between chews, Ray asked what it was like to be married. It never took long for us to delve into meaningful topics; he seemed to prefer substantive conversation.

Without his paintbrush mouthpiece as a barrier, Ray and I covered more territory in our conversation than in previous visits. He ate slowly, and I mostly listened. We talked about his deployments to Germany, his life-changing accident at age 22, and the central role of faith in his life.

"People often wonder, 'Why you always smilin', Ray?' And I just keep smilin'. There's a mystery to it all. It makes 'em think I'm up to something."

"That's 'cause you are," I cracked. "No mystery there."

He nodded with a wry smile.

I poured tea in his mug and got up to grab a straw. When the temperature was right, he took a few sips of tea through the straw. He asked me to break up some saltine crackers in his soup.

"Let me tell you something." His words softened to a

whisper. I often had to lean closer to hear what he was saying, but this time he did the leaning.

"It's because my hope is alive. People don't wanna share their hope 'cause it makes you vulnerable, but most people haven't stopped to think about what theirs really is. When they finally do, everything changes."

Dickinson again:

I've heard it in the chilliest land—
And on the strangest Sea—
Yet—never—in Extremity,
It asked a crumb—of me.¹

After a few silent moments, I asked, "What's your hope?"

He paused, then with clarity said, "To be ready when I hear the call." Another smile. This one beaming.

We made our way back toward the patient rooms, and he asked when I'd be back.

"About a month," I said. "Maybe we'll make some more progress with your painting next time. Regardless, thanks for sharing lunch with me."

Then he said something that caught me off-guard.

"I appreciate our visits. I consider them precious and life-giving. They always bring me back to hope."

On my walk back to school, I thought about how much Ray taught me during this visit, as with all the others. I thought about his birdhouse, his bib, and the many blessings he cherishes. I wondered if he knew of his impact.

At first sight, Ray is a man confined by his health. Yet his hope challenges all convention. It brings joy. And it sets him free. To outsiders like me, his words and deeds carry weight, and they have a way of lightening weight unseen.

So, at the end of it, what tethers? For Ray, it's hope. And, without asking so much as a crumb of me, he reminds me of mine.

References

1. Dickinson, E. Hope Is the Thing with Feathers. In: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by R.W. Franklin. Cambridge (MA): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1999: 140.

The author's E-mail address is jwagner6@luc.edu.