

How a “Nothingoma” Can Bring Joy to a Physician

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Joanne was a 38-year-old housewife and mother of 4: 2 teens and twin 10-year-old girls. She was referred to me in the neurology clinic because a routine brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan showed a minor abnormality. Joanne’s mother had died suddenly of a brain aneurysm when Joanne was 13.

During our visit, I talked with Joanne and examined her. Everything was perfectly fine. I reviewed the MRI. It clearly showed an incidental, harmless finding, a “nothingoma.” As I reassured her and was making my exit, Joanne grasped my hand between hers.

“Oh, Doctor,” she tearfully exclaimed, “thank you so much. I was so worried. I am so grateful to you. God bless you, Doctor.”

To be honest, I was embarrassed by this effusive praise. All I did was review a routine MRI. “Joanne,” I was about to say, “No problem. It was nothing.” But then I realized:

To Joanne this was SOMETHING.

To Joanne, this was a BIG SOMETHING.

And this should have been, to me, a SOMETHING.

This should have been, to me, a BIG SOMETHING.

I should have cherished that moment as much as she.

I saw a bumper sticker a while ago. It read: “It’s amazing how you can affect someone’s life so deeply, and never appreciate it.”

I will confess. For much of my career, in this situation, I would have been in the category of “never appreciate it.” But I am now 70 years old. I have been a physician for 38 of those years, more than half my life. I now understand that, for Joanne, our encounter was a life-affirming blessing. And I now understand that, for me, our encounter was just as much—such a blessing.

To all my physician and healer colleagues, let me ask you: How many of us are in the category of “never appreciate it”? How many of us ignore the powerful beauty of our everyday, “nothingoma” blessings? ❖

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