

Drugs, Death, and God by Chelsey Bartlett

There are three standard reasons college students want to become a doctor: money (because they haven't checked out how much you can make as a contract lawyer), a more-than-lukewarm interest in science, or the cliché tagline: "Because My Parents are Doctors", which doesn't really explain anything. Some common "exceptions" exist as sub-reasons, including the desire to help people while *simultaneously* having a more-than-lukewarm interest in science or "Because My Parents are Doctors and are Forcing Me to Be Pre-Med upon Threat of Disownment." I find my motive to be a bit more distinctive than the typical ones: everything boils down to me being on my deathbed under the influence of hallucinogenic painkillers while God was giving me a sign that I am meant to be a doctor.

I've never been particularly overzealous in my religious pronouncements, but even as an 8th grader I knew that when God gave you a signal, He meant business. The end of middle school was approaching and the customary set of flu-like symptoms began bombarding me. My physician recommended, in a rather blasé fashion, to take some Ibuprofen and get more sleep, so I did. The symptoms stayed. And then got worse. My fever regularly spiked to 104 and higher, and I couldn't even keep tepid Sprite down. Mom took me to my doctor again, and this time he realized his mistake: this was no snotty, vomity flu but a case of pneumonia gone sour.

My right lung had been completely infiltrated by the gooey crust that is pneumonia and my left lung was showing initial signs of surrender as well. The small-town hospital in which I helplessly dwelled for days was no match for this angry battalion of germs, so some nice Australian pilots flew me in a helicopter to the Children's Mercy Hospital an hour away. I arrived dazed and surrounded by a large group of interns in the ICU, much like in *Gray's Anatomy*. They wanted to put me on a respirator because my oxygen saturation was so low, but I screamed and cried in panic at the foreign machine and was eventually just given a giant oxygen mask instead. Crazy kids apparently aren't worth the effort.

After the interns left, I calmed down enough to realize that the strangest knowledge had come over me. I knew that if I fell asleep at that moment, I could choose not to wake up again. I was legitimately dying. Of course, having been pumped full of drugs at the time, I instantly fell asleep at that precise instant of revelation. When I groggily began to awaken, everything was different. Ethereal children ran into the room carrying helium-filled balloons toward their father in a bed next to mine. He smiled. His gaze turned to mine, and somehow at that moment I knew I was his doctor and that, though I was confined to a bed, I had just saved his life. I smiled back at him, beaming with pride.

Hallucinations like this repeated in cycles throughout my next few days in the ICU, though the items the ethereal children carried ranged from balloons to stuffed bears to insanely unhealthy-looking cheeseburgers. I began to adore my own team of caretakers. The pregnant nurse who brought in the food I could never eat took on an aura of poised mystery. My respiratory therapist became the cheese to my metaphorical macaroni. And my doctor: well, he was a demi-god. Slowly my runaway lungs worked their way towards health, and by the time I left the ICU, I knew that my future was in medicine.

My idolatry of these figures faded in time, but one religious aspect of this experience never left me: God had used this time of sickness as an opportunity to give me my calling as a physician. Drugs and exhaustion certainly made their unique contribution, but never has my mind been as clearly made up as during and after my fierce battle with pneumonia in that ICU. Of course, to confirm this new love for medicine I did my homework: I witnessed my fair share of bloody knee-replacements and craniotomies, volunteered to wheel-chair wrinkly old people to and from radiology in the local hospital, and read everything ever written by Atul Gawande, Abraham Verghese, and my all-time favorite, Richard Selzer. Now I'm a gung-ho pre-medical student itching to start applying to medical school, all thanks to death, drugs, and a sign from God.

Author Bio: Chelsey Bartlett is a junior studying Human Biology at Stanford University. After graduation, she hopes to get a Doctorate in Psychology and become a clinical psychologist. In her spare time, Chelsey practices archery, works for a Huntington's Disease outreach group on campus, and tutors underprivileged middle school students. You can reach her at: chelseybATstanford.edu