Twitter Thread by Sayed Tabatabai, MD



Sayed Tabatabai, MD
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When she was a child, her dream was to be an artist. She would chew her lip, and grip her crayon far too tightly as she tried to stay within the lines.

“Be practical,” her father said.

“Enjoy art in your spare time. Work hard. Then, maybe someday.”

Maybe someday. 1/

She puts on the vest that completes her uniform. At her last job she had a name badge, but not here.

Just the words “ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES” in block letters.

Her granddaughter once asked her if that meant she was saving the environment.

“Sort of, mija,” she laughed. 2/

She has been “Janitorial Staff,” “Hospital Housekeeping,” and “Cleaning Crew” over the years.

The job remains the same.

She gets the equipment ready on her cart. She is detail-oriented. Everything in its place.

The little walkie-talkie on her cart crackles to life. 3/

Her first assignment is a room cleaning.

It will be the first of many.

She is often under immense time pressure, as rooms must be cleaned before a new patient can use them.

It’s a time-consuming process, even though she has become extremely efficient at it.

Laborious. 4/

She makes her way into the elevator, maneuvering her equipment cart and the trash container on wheels.

There are two other people on the elevator. She says “good morning.”

One nods hello. The other doesn’t.

She’s learned not to expect thanks, but a hello would be nice. 5/

As she cleans rooms her thoughts are usually far away. Often she’s thinking about her family, worrying about their future.

Worrying about a thousand things, as only a mother does.

Praying beneath her breath for crises averted and hopes achieved.

But always... she sees. 6/

She sees an empty room, and imagines the patient. Were their crises averted? Were their hopes achieved?

Sometimes a room just had a Code Blue. Sometimes the aftermath is bloody.

There is a gravity in a place where a human being has recently died.

A palpable force. 7/

She is a religious woman, and she feels this is what must be left when a soul departs.

Some last lingering remnant of the trajectory of a human life.

Of an end, and a beginning.

As she wipes the floors, and changes the linens, and sanitizes the surfaces, she bears witness. 8/

Her walkie-talkie crackles to life throughout the day. From one room to another.

Someone spills coffee, and asks her to clean it up before walking away hurriedly, glued to their phone.

She sets up her sign, “Caution (Cuidado), Wet Floor (Piso Mojado).”

And she mops. 9/

She’s late for her next room cleaning. The coffee spill only delayed her a little bit, but she still gets an earful from an angry supervisor.

The patient is waiting! The room needs to be cleaned, now!

At least this one is a happier room.

The patient was discharged home. 10/

Some of the rooms she cleans are COVID-19 rooms. She is considered high risk and was vaccinated in the first wave. She has to wear special protective gear.

They tell her the solutions she uses will kill any remnants of the virus.

She makes sure she misses no spots. 11/

Later in the day she's on the elevator again. The doors open, and a stretcher is pushed inside with a heavy black drape over it. She knows what it means and says a silent prayer.

The morgue attendant grins at her.

"We're both cleanup crew, eh?"

She smiles faintly. 12/

She doesn't think of herself as part of the cleanup crew.

She is someone else.

Each empty room is a canvas onto which the depth and breadth of the human experience are painted.

These empty rooms breathe.

They are saturated with suffering, and hope.

She bears witness. 13/

Towards the end of the day she is about to clean one last room on the COVID unit.

She overhears the patient's family on a speakerphone, thanking the doctors and nurses. "You're our heroes," they say.

She makes sure her mask is on tight, sealed.

And she enters the empty room.