

“America Needs Farmers”, But the Farmer Needs a Physician

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There's something missing between us, you and I. There's something I wish you could hear, something I wish you could feel, and allow to well up and bubble over inside of you with childlike joy.

If I close my eyes and sit still, I can hear the sound now and my heart leaps inside of me. It's a conditioned response, of course- born from many years of muddy easter egg hunts, creamy summer malts, cool autumn breezes that guide kites high into the atmosphere, and metal runner sleds slicing through ice banks.

What is this sound?

Rumbling tires.

It's a sound of transition between pavement and gravel. It's a sound made up of a thousand points of pressure, as rubber, accustomed to smooth city pavement, makes contact with country road. In a moment, the rock fragments underneath begin to spit, pop and fly with sudden freedom.

This rumbling always triggers a rush of expectant excitement in me. Even at a young age, when that sound awakened me from a nap in my car seat, I knew what that rumbling meant. Instead of eliciting a sleepy, grumpy frown, the rumbling sound peeled my eyes and my heart wide open with excitement.

I still find that my heart leaps the same way now when the left turns I make onto that gravel road are not in my parent's minivan but in my Volkswagen Beetle. I make that drive on my own now, but once those tires start to make the gravel beneath them fly, I know that my solitude will soon be swallowed up by a fullness of joy.

My favorite time to make that left turn onto that gravel road is a Friday evening around dusk. As you descend into a fold in the hills of northeast Iowa, you see a farm tucked away, marking its presence by a warm glow of kitchen and living room lights. I may be biased, but I have yet to see a more picturesque plot of land.

Yes, there is certainly something missing between us.

I wish you knew everything that rumbling sound meant to me.

I wish you reveled in my grandma's homemade bedtime stories at age six with my cousins and me, and saw all of the forts we built over the years from the scraps of materials we found around the machine shed and in the woods behind the house.

I wish you could've sat on the living room carpet with me at age eight, savoring the perfect pairing of a chocolate malt and microwave popcorn, after hours of hiding up in the apple tree away from the beam of a cousin's flashlight.

I wish you struggled to warm up to the new farm dog in your teen years as much as I did because you loved Buster and Simba so much, but had to help Grandma bury them by the pumpkin patch.

I wish you surged with the same pride when the bitter, dark liquid only the adults drank became palatable to you, and suddenly, you could share the morning hours of a Saturday with them and hear about their lives, instead of just being asked about your own.

I wish you paused with the warmth of a newborn in your strong nineteen-year-old arms as you sat in front of the wood-burning fireplace, realizing he's the last cousin of yours to be born, and that even amid the frenzy of college, you were reminded that life is precious.

I wish you sat at the table with me at twenty-one and saw how a glass of wine and a board game could make the bellies of twenty people hurt from laughter.

I wish you delighted in the five Christmas trees Grandma put up throughout the house this past year, and gazed with wonder at the multitude of lights she hung on the peaks of roofs and silos, strung at heights that stubbornly defied her aging joints and double-knee-replacement.

I wish you relished in Grandma's creamy "blizzard day soup" on a bitterly cold day, and heard my Grandpa say "well biiijingles" and saw the soft smile in his eyes.

I wish you sat on blanket-covered hay bales on a warm afternoon in early October, surrounded by three generations that are in tow of Grandpa's orange tractor. I wish you were enamored by the rolling hills of the surrounding farmland that were crowned in gold and cardinal and umber, with all of its natural glory beheld in full strength.

I wish you could feel the ache in my heart at the thought that all of those things will come to an end someday.

Only then would you understand the turmoil I have in my mind as I consider the future with a stethoscope in hand.

There was a moment, in this last year, when my husband and I stood at the top of that left-turn gravel road, and we surveyed the land below and took in the view of the farm we loved so much. Our feet were planted in the very square foot of the world where that "rumbling-of-tires" sound would begin. We were married that past summer, and everything about our lives remained unwritten. At that moment, as we stood in the square foot of the world that makes my heart leap, we welcomed a possibility into our hearts, and "what-ifs" filled our minds.

We love it out here.

What if?

But...

We stand in silence for a moment.

More moments pass.

There are, in fact, *many* "but"'s.

I could have a job because I have a stethoscope. In fact, I would most likely be begged by a local clinic to bring my stethoscope with me into town. But where does my husband dream, and create, as an engineer in a place that doesn't even have a Walmart within an hour's radius? Where do we go to church? How would we make friends with an aging population, while the few

young people that are there are making an exodus to the city? We would be a few hours from the dear friendships we do have. Would we be lonely? Would it be worth it?

I am being educated in the city of the old capitol. I wear black and gold. As I sit in these classrooms, my eyes are opened to issues of access that I had been blind to before. I realize disease is sometimes inevitable, but sometimes it is like a plant and has roots, and sometimes prevention is some of the best care I can provide.

I spend some of the days of my education in the hospital where precious, sick children wave from above on gamedays, to thousands of neighbors from different cities below them. In the hallways and rooms of that hospital, I keep my ears open. I ask my patients how they are getting along, and I hear of families traveling milages with three digits to be here. My eyebrows were raised the first few times I heard those numbers. Now, I expect them. My own in-laws throw four digits' worth of miles, yearly, into their car to get black-and-gold healthcare, because it is much better than what they can get in their small town. The hospital recognizes these three-digit travelers. You see these hard-working neighbors celebrated on hats and shirts on gamedays: "ANF". "America Needs Farmers".

Not everyone wants to regularly brave three digits worth of miles to be examined by a stethoscope. In fact, many gravel road dwellers either don't trust the stethoscopes in their surrounding towns or, out of apathy, hide from them for many years.

They hide in the folds of the rolling hills and along remote gravel roads, far from the constant stir of the highway.

They lay silent plaque in their hearts.

The brown dots on *their* aching, sun-soaked backs slowly discolor, and the borders of these dots smear and creep silently and deadly through their skin.

Exposed flesh on numb, overworked feet festers and ulcerates, with sugar coursing through *their* blood, frustrating their healing.

Family members notice *their* slips in memory on holidays, and politeness keeps concerned words unsaid.

Yes, *they* are hidden, but we know they are there.

The human condition only allows them to stay hidden for so long. Many of them are forced by preference or fulminant disease to seek black-and-gold healthcare. What formed silently over time, now requires the most skilled eyes to watch over them.

I see this truth regularly with my own eyes, as I stand along the wall in my short white coat, behind the one with the state's most skilled eyes in the long white coat.

The power of prevention is magnified in its absence.

I talk to the other short white coats. They notice the importance of that power too.

We will have long white coats someday soon. Our stethoscopes are powerful. Where will we leverage them?

The city of the old capitol has many short coats standing in line, with bright eyes and hungry minds, waiting for their names to be embroidered in black and gold on a long white coat. The gravel roads, however, are home to long white coats that are crowned with grey hair. They sit expectantly, waiting to be relieved after a lifetime of humble service. Very few are eager to take their place.

Many of us in short white coats plant our feet stubbornly in the cement of city pavement. We crave relevancy, impact, civilization, and novelty. Perhaps a few of us would migrate a few miles, but we grip the white picket fences of the suburbs with white knuckles, not daring to be tugged an inch farther.

We white-knuckle the city limits because we want something.

The short coats and I want yellow patio umbrellas to shield our eyes from the summer sun, as we savor our brunches while seated along downtown brick streets.

We want to laugh with our friends at our Edison bulb-lit breweries in the cool of an early autumn evening.

We want to get lost in the sound of a complex melody from local musicians expressing themselves to their eclectic community members.

We want to sweat within the camaraderie of a warehouse CrossFit gym if we are going to hit our alarm a couple of hours before clinic.

We want to sample local wine while overlooking a tree-lined valley in late September, deep in conversation with close companions.

We want to spend evenings losing our voices under bright lights, cheering for balls to go into end zones and hoops.

We want to dance nights away with our surroundings being intermittently illuminated by strobing lights, surrounded by youth and beautiful people.

We want to spend moody Saturday mornings sipping a cappuccino at a local cafe, gazing out large windows at a manicured, rustic avenue.

We want to stroll on river trails on Sunday afternoons, smiling at bikers and strangers that are mutually delighting in the sunlight that is reviving our souls.

We want to walk in modern, renovated hallways on our Mondays and learn from experts in their field, and be surrounded by a culture of prestige.

We want what is built up, clean, progressive, stimulating, Instagram-able, and comfortable.

If we, the short coats, are honest with ourselves, maybe we don't want to shoulder a greying population in an understaffed hospital, hearing whispers of doors closing. Maybe we don't want to prescribe the same medications for standard case presentations most of our careers. Maybe we don't want to be a part of a small care team where our hard work is depended on, but perhaps not recognized. Maybe we don't want to serve in a local clinic where there isn't an opportunity to advance and be seen as competent, and maybe even great, like our egos perhaps would like.

Maybe we are scared that we come home at the end of a long day and are greeted by the screen of the phone in our pocket, and it tells us with its sneaky evil light, that the other short coats, that now wear long ones, have what we wanted all along. Maybe that screen boasts their presence at their brick street brunches, Edison-bulb breweries, and large-windowed cafes, surrounded by community, thriving, and dare you wonder... content?

Then, maybe the screen goes dark.

Maybe we lie in our beds.

Maybe we hear the whirl of the cicadas outside.

Maybe we hear a coyote in the timber out back.

Maybe the moon isn't shining on that night, and our bedroom is black.

Maybe the souls of people we know really well are three digits' worth of miles away...

Maybe we are scared that we will feel

alone.

Maybe... *I'm* worried that will be me.

Maybe I do notice the people from the gravel roads. Maybe I do know *they* are there.

Maybe I know *they* need a stethoscope nearby. Maybe I know *they* need short white coats standing at the ready. Maybe I know that all of the black ties that debate issues under the gold dome of the new capitol will compensate all of the money I owe them if I went and served those folks from the gravel roads. Yet, even the thought of *forgiveness for all the money I owe* for my black-and-gold education can't silence the fear in my head:

the fear I have of feeling isolated.

Sometimes, we go to the Lutheran church near my grandparents' farm. As we pass through town, they tell me all about what it used to be. They point to dilapidated buildings, claiming they used to be grocery stores or community centers. I have to admit, it's hard to imagine. They get faraway looks in their eyes as they say things have changed since they grew up there. They point out the homes with tricycles and basketball hoops outside of them.

There aren't many.

Driving through that town has always made me feel odd, like I am trespassing into a closed exhibit of a museum. It's an odd juxtaposition, because although the town makes me feel that way, my grandparents' farm doesn't. The farm is the one place in the whole world where I feel like I can take a deep breath that actually restores something inside of me.

I wish you could take a breath of that same air at the top of the lane like I can. I wish you could hear that rumbling of tires with me. I wish that rumbling could elicit all of the same memories that flash through my mind and fill my soul. I wish they could fill yours too.

Yes, there's certainly something missing between you and me.

Only then you would understand the knot in my gut:

My grandparents are getting older.

They deserve someone to serve them and take care of them.

I want that for them so very badly, out of deep, deep love.

They need a stethoscope.

Everyone that is like them needs a stethoscope.

I look around and see no one else is going.

And yet, if I'm honest, I'm not sure I want to go either.

When I stood on the top of that gravel lane with my husband that day, I felt genuine sorrow. It was, and is, a sorrow that stems from the adoration for two people and a place colliding with the agenda of selfish desire. The view of the rolling hills I loved, the souls of people down below, and two decades of memories were the catalyst of the collision. I am still waiting for the impact to dissipate inside of me.

Who will go?

I don't have an answer. I just have a stomach that aches and feels unrest, eyes that recognize need, and yet a heart that desires belonging and comfort.

But I love the farmhouse with the glowing living room lights and the gravel lane that makes my tires rumble and my heart leap. I deeply love the people that live there.

See?

There is something missing between us, you and me.

That farmhouse.

But there are others.

I know I'm not the only one with a heart full of love for a farm tucked in the hills, a farm lost among the grids of gravel roads. I know I am not the only one that loves the hardworking souls that labor on that land and want watchful eyes and a stethoscope to care for them.

For they're aging and groaning,
They toil and ache.
We cry their anthems from cities,
But leave them sick for our "ideal life"'s sake.

"Prevention!" "Access!"
"It matters!" "We can!"
But when soldiers are sought,
No one raises their hand.

But *our* friends, *our* lives,
How could *we* leave this place?
We want excitement, infrastructure,
And a much faster pace.

We advocate for them from our ivory tower,
But the town slowly empties for the faithful old plower.
That mounts the John Deere before the rising of the sun,
Logging fourteen long hours before work's considered "done".

They need watchful eyes for their healing.

They seek the best in the state.

Should all of our greatest

Stay huddled in one place?

We don't want to feel alone.

Of course, what soul should want to?

Yet *they* will fade out that way

If no short white coats come through

They're the unsung heroes.

We take for granted our met need

They're the unsung heroes

With a whole world to feed

Iowa! Iowa!

Strain your ear to listen:

"America Needs Farmers",

But the farmer needs a physician.

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