

You Already Know

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

ONE OF THE FEW incontrovertible facts of a life is its finitude. Although we humans share this feature with all other earthly creatures, we are unique in our awareness of it. All our roles, jobs and housing are temporary. We are visitors here, and all visits have an ending.

The phrase “for whom the bell tolls” comes from an essay written by the English poet John Donne in 1624. Its topic was what we might now call human interdependence, how all of humanity is one family, joined in its finitude. Donne asks, on hearing a church bell ringing an announcement of someone’s death: “Never send to ask for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.”

The essay is also the source of another memorable expression of human solidarity, “no man is an island.” It served as the anchor phrase for a corny inspirational song from my elementary school chorus, which fit the idealism of the era: “No man is an island/no man walks alone/each man’s joy is joy to me/each man’s grief is my own.”

In 35 years of primary care medicine, I’ve had the chance to practice the art of both identifying with and maintaining separation from my patients’ pains and griefs. In moments of reflection, away from the clinic, I’ve come to realize that it is only a matter of luck and a matter of time until their suffering and my own merge via our shared humanity. In those moments, I do already know. **SDP**



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“You Already Know” For LS

When the ambulance siren wails, it screams for you
 When the remembrance candle is lit, it flickers for you
 When the cop pronounces the homeless man, he declares for you
 When the young mother weeps in the neonatal ICU, she cries for you
 When the neighbor admits his wife passed in her sleep, he reports for you
 When the memorial carves three thousand names, it spells out for you
 When the ER doctor terminates the code blue, she stops for you
 When the coroner inscribes the certificate, he signs for you
 When the obituary details, it explains for you

So, do not ask for whom the bell tolls.
 You already know.