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In a Box

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As I took my hair out of the elastic band, I noticed a flicker of something bright. I investigated further and my suspicions were confirmed: It was my first grey hair. Declaring this a significant finding may seem vain, but the discovery made me pause—this single strand of hair represented my last year of clinical training.

I was an anesthesiology critical care fellow in the midst of Boston’s COVID surge. Ultimately, I worked a lot of extra shifts and bore witness to the devastation that the virus had on individuals and their families. Despite this, I rarely cried.

After Boston’s surge, I transitioned into the role of attending without a second thought. Recently, I watched a video diary of 2 intensivists sharing their experiences in New York City at the peak of the pandemic. Within moments of hearing their account of the physical and emotional toll their experiences had on them, I felt uncomfortable. I felt dyspneic as a whirlwind of emotions descended.

At the beginning of the surge, I was scared. I was not sure if my personal protective equipment was adequate, so I entered a minefield each day, feeling completely naked. The invisible enemy taunted me with every breathing tube I placed. Then I was heartbroken. Most of my patients were immigrants trying to live the American dream, only to become infected from workplace exposures. With every call I made to their family members, I could not help but think that my patients could have easily been my mom or dad—who never took a day off from work in their determination to make a better life for me. Darkness quickly followed. Even when I could see and feel the sun on my skin, I felt betrayed by the crowds and ongoing gatherings of people who were oblivious to the catastrophe hidden within the confines of our hospital. And finally, guilt. I felt guilty taking in a breath of fresh air when so many others could not. I felt guilty for not being able to help all my patients. I felt guilty for being alive.
Around the time of watching the video diary, one of my co-fellows reached out through our group chat to ask if any of us felt like we had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from our COVID surge experiences. I read the question and dismissed it. But as I watched the video diary and felt convulsions of emotion pouring out from my soul, I realized I never processed what I witnessed, experienced, and lived through. I put it all in a box so I could keep going to work. I sealed the box so that nothing could escape and distract me from the mission at hand: caring for critically ill patients.

With time, I noticed certain triggers would poke holes into my box. Watching the video diary and reliving moments of fear, anxiety, and despair caused by caring for someone’s mother, sister, or daughter ripped open that box. Now when I am triggered, I let these feelings wash over me. I have started my healing process by reflecting upon the intimate moments I witnessed. With time, I have acknowledged my survivor’s guilt, instituted a gratitude practice, and allowed for self-compassion. Healing my battle wounds has required solitude and time away from the hospital—a luxury I now have as an attending that rarely exists for trainees.

Trainees who were thrust into the heat of battle during the surge are now tending to their emotional battle wounds. Each of us is processing the trauma differently. As casualties of COVID-19 continue to rise, I implore our educational and hospital leadership to allow for the unpacking of these metaphorical boxes in a safe way. Some trainees may experience PTSD, and others—like myself—may have boxed everything up and never had a chance to unpack it through reflection in a safe, supported space. Merely encouraging the use of employee assistance programs is not enough; offering staff nonclinical time to reflect and debrief individually, with
peers, and with program leadership allows those who need it to tend to battle wounds and allows them to face the next battle with a new set of tools to protect vulnerable learners.

I am healing now, but each time I see the glimmer of light in my dark waves of hair, I am reminded of the need to unpack.