

Deb's Picks

Time On Fire by Evan Handler

A memoir of a young man's struggle to survive leukemia

Evan Handler was an up-and-coming New York actor in his 20's when he was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia which, he was told, he was unlikely to survive. Based on his hit off-Broadway play, Time On Fire is a memoir of Handler's 5 year journey through some of the best and worst that medicine and its providers have to offer. Written with wit, fury and touching eloquence, it is impossible to read this poignant account of Handler's struggle for survival without examining our own attitudes towards death and dying. Whether reading it through the eyes of a medical provider, a family member or simply a curious individual, this book teaches us as much about ourselves as it does about Handler.

Once the examination began, the obviousness of the differences between Timothy Gee's capabilities and the other doctors' expanded galactically. I was stunned by the disparity. When Dr. Gee touched me he was gentle. And yet, "gentle" is insufficient. Tender. That was it. Dr. Gee touched my body as he might handle something that was delicate and that was precious to him. There was reverence in his touch. And humility. Timothy Gee, from the moment he entered the room, made no assumptions of superiority and held no illusions that asserting it might simplify his assignment. Dr. Gee practiced medicine as if he were attempting to commune with divinity. He possessed the humbleness of one who wishes to be granted access to a realm in which there are infinite forces at work, most of them wielding powers much more marvelous than his own. Ultimately, Dr. Gee had no more success in identifying the source of my fever than anyone else. But, he succeeded in setting a standard that very few medical professionals I had met ever approached.

Even at the time I was aware of the idiocy in the fact that his behavior should be such a revelation, but the evidence was substantial. Such simple, sensible talent had been a colossal rarity during my stays at Sloan-Kettering. Not unheard of, but glaringly scarce. And I wondered why this was. Why for every Timothy Gee were there twelve Zweigs? How could thirty nurses whose most distinctive feature was their indifference share duties with the few who were truly dedicated? And what was it that set the devoted ones apart? Had the bad ones once been good, and, if so, what was it they had lost along the way?

Inevitably, this imbalance results in the greatest battles being forced on those who wish to do the best work. Because each extra effort they make becomes an affront to the person who refuses to demand as much from him or herself. Thus, acceptance of mediocrity is quickly transformed into insistence upon it, and the message is clear for both the staff and patients: cooperate rather than excel. I have seen the same syndrome demonstrated in every arena I've encountered, from education to the entertainment industry. Even so, I was astonished to find that it was prominently practiced when the stakes were as high as life and death.