Hello, my name is Kevin Penn and I am 41 years old. When asked to describe who I am, many labels come to mind. I am a husband to Kristin—my soul mate and love of my life—father of two young boys, Oliver (age 6) and Elliot (age 4), as well as a brother, son, friend, coworker, executive at a public company, and a bicycling enthusiast. Those labels, and maybe a few others, largely define who I am. I also happen to be a leukemia survivor. As a result, this makes me a representative of the thousands of patients with cancer that you see and treat on a regular basis.

I became that representative when I was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia (AML) on May 29, 2008, at the age of 37. After six months of intensive treatments, including many long hospital stays and only a few months of recovery, I, unfortunately, relapsed. Given how tenacious my leukemia was proving to be, I earned a trip to Duke University Medical Center’s adult bone marrow transplantation program, where I underwent a stem cell transplantation in 2009. I was very fortunate to have a matched donor in my brother.

Words cannot come close to describing how extremely tough those 18 months were for my family and for me. We were frightened, we were angry, and we were hopeful. Conveying how hellacious that treatment process was is nearly impossible, but, as I sat down to write this article, the analytical side of me took hold and I thought I could convey the treatment through the numbers. Here is what one AML diagnosis can equal: 52 high-dosage chemotherapy treatments, 11 bone marrow biopsies, 114 days in the hospital, 121 days of clinic visits, 10 total body irradiation treatments, 15 gray of irradiation absorbed by my body, 5,672 pills ingested, 1,327 blood tests, 67 blood/platelet bags transfused, 70 microbiology tests, one year of chronic graft-versus-host disease issues, 61 days of neutropenia, 34 radiology procedures, 10,450 mg of prednisone, 198 complete blood count tests, and 9 million stem cells collected from my brother.

All of this wasn’t very pleasant, of course. But I suppose one of the things you don’t realize before you become an AML survivor is that it’s not all horrible and dark. In fact, looking back, I have many positive memories. Memories I’m going to cherish for the rest of my life. And most of them, perhaps even all of them, are because of the individual acts of kindness I experienced from friends, family, and my medical caregivers. In the end, it’s not the 31st x-ray or the 38th chemotherapy bag or the 300th blood test that I’m going to remember years from now; it’s the acts of kindness. Perhaps the most significant, most lasting, and certainly the most inspiring part of a medical professional’s job is not what was learned in school or what was read in a book; instead, it is those small, unscripted, unexpected acts of kindness that really matter.

These gestures, which came from so many, meant so much.

• Displaying a warm and knowing smile at 2 am while hanging a bag of chemotherapy—an event that I dreaded from the first to the last bag.

• Taking care of my wife and family as if they were patients, too, making sure that their own fight was taken into consideration.

• Making as little noise as possible when walking into the room in the wee hours of the morning to allow me and my family to rest.

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• Taking the time to answer any question about my treatments or medications as if I was the only patient on the floor.
• Slapping me a high five when all I could do was walk to the end of the hallway and back.
• Greeting me as I walked onto the floor as if I was Norm on Cheers—like I was coming back to a friendly place to hang out instead of fighting for my life.
• Encouraging me to be positive at all times. A quote from one of my nurses that will stay with me forever: “Act sick and you’ll be sick.”
• Making milkshakes for my two-year-old son so that he would enjoy coming to the hospital instead of being fearful of a father he didn’t recognize and who was too weak to play with him.
• Providing a shoulder to cry on when the overwhelming gravity of the situation became too much to bear.
• Remembering that, regardless of whether I was laughing or crying, I was scared.
• And, most importantly, having my caregivers make me feel like the fight for my life was equally as important to them as it was to me.

You will notice that all of my most pivotal and significant memories from my care are all about human interactions that went above and beyond purely professional obligations. From a patient’s perspective, I would argue that the crucial and most memorable moments are oftentimes when a caregiver takes the time to connect with the patient on a human level. This is not, of course, to belittle the importance of a medical caregiver’s professional and clinical competency. Being good at the science and medicine and being great nurses and clinicians are expectations from a patient and essential to delivering great medical care. But, at many crucial moments in my care—and I’m pretty sure in the crucial moments of most of your patients—it’s the empathy, compassion, understanding, and support that often will make the critical differences in your patients’ outcomes and will be forever appreciated and remembered by those under your care.

In closing, I’d like to offer up some of my personal moments from the past 12 months to potentially help you remember what your work can afford someone like me, and to thank you humbly, profusely, and with a very full heart for all that you do. Because of your work, a guy like me can celebrate his 41st birthday four years after diagnosis and three years after my transplantation; take part in a 120-mile bicycle ride in Colorado over three mountains, climbing 11,000 feet and all a mile above sea level or more; help his oldest boy ride his bike without training wheels for the first time; see his son’s first day of kindergarten; and have a very real potential for seeing many more wedding anniversaries and family events for years to come.

None of this would have been possible without the work that you do.