

They covered the precious mahogany coffin with a brown amalgam of rocks, decomposed organisms, and weeds. It was my turn to take the shovel, but I felt too ashamed to dutifully send her off when I had not properly said goodbye. I refused to throw dirt on her. I refused to let go of my grandmother, to accept a death I had not seen coming, to believe that an illness could not only interrupt, but steal a beloved life.

When my parents finally revealed to me that my grandmother had been battling liver cancer, I was twelve and I was angry, mostly with myself. They had wanted to protect me—only six years old at the time—from the complex and morose concept of death. However, when the end



inevitably arrived, I wasn't trying to comprehend what dying was I was trying to understand how I had been able to abandon my sick grandmother in favor of playing with friends and watching TV. Hurt that my parents had deceived me and resentful of my own oblivion, I committed myself to preventing such blindness from resurfacing.

I became desperately devoted to my education because I saw knowledge as the key to freeing myself from the chains of ignorance. While learning about cancer in school I promised myself that I would memorize every fact and absorb every detail in textbooks and online medical journals. And as I began to



consider my future, I realized that what I learned in school would allow me to silence that which had silenced my grandmother. However, I was focused not with learning itself, but with good grades and high test scores. I started to believe that academic perfection would be the only way to redeem myself in her eyes—to make up for what I had not done as a granddaughter.

However, a simple walk on a hiking trail behind my house made me open my own eyes to the truth. Over the years, everything, even honoring my grandmother—had become second to school and grades. As my shoes humbly tapped against the earth, the towering trees



blackened by the forest fire a few years ago, the faintly colorful pebbles embedded in the sidewalk, and the wispy white clouds hanging in the sky reminded me of my small though nonetheless significant part in a larger whole that is humankind and this Earth. Before I could resolve my guilt, I had to broaden my perspective of the world as well as my responsibilities to my fellow humans.

Volunteering at a cancer treatment center has helped me discover my path. When I see patients trapped in not only the hospital but also a moment in time by their diseases, I talk to them. For six hours a day, three times a week, Ivana is surrounded by IV stands, empty



walls, and busy nurses that quietly yet constantly remind her of her breast cancer. Her face is pale and tired, yet kind--not unlike my grandmothers. I need only to smile and say hello to see her brighten up as life returns to her face. Upon our first meeting, she opened up about her two sons, her hometown, and her knitting group--no mention of her disease. Without even standing up, the three of us Ivana, me, and my grandmother--had taken a walk together.

Cancer, as powerful and invincible as it may seem, is a mere fraction of a person's life. It's easy to forget when one's mind and body are so weak and vulnerable. I want to be there as



an oncologist to remind them to take a walk once in a while, to remember that theres so much more to life than a disease. while I physically treat their cancer, I want to lend patients emotional support and mental strength to escape the interruption and continue living. Through my work, I can accept the shovel without burying my grandmothers memory.