

## A PIECE OF MY MIND

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## Dressing Up

**When the dread starts to set in**, when it gets hard to breathe, I adjust my N95 mask and remind myself of this: I am the granddaughter of a man who worked the depths of Idaho mines and knew a thing or two about personal protective equipment (PPE) hell.

My challenges as an emergency medicine physician during a modern pandemic marked by PPE shortages that require me to wear a single-use mask for an entire shift pale in comparison. Every piece of protective equipment my grandfather wore in the fiery bowels of the earth was a hard-won victory. He and his fellow miners had to fight tooth and nail to wear safety gloves, for example, because mine owners thought the time it took workers to remove and replace them slowed them down sufficiently that it cut too far into their profit margin. Lost fingers were just collateral damage in the wake of unmitigated greed.

Over the past few months, I have thought of my grandfather often. Every time I catch a glimpse of myself in full PPE in the azure glass of the negative pressure rooms housing the most critically ill patients with

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coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), I can't help but imagine myself entering a mine shaft. Here I am after decades of higher education, an opportunity that he would have envied, and I look much like a miner. Most of my face is covered, but if you watch my eyes closely, you can spot my smile at the thought.

You see, my grandfather is a bit of a legend in our family and among the community that still remembers him in northern Idaho. He not only fought for protective equipment for himself and his fellow miners, but he also organized unions at a time when doing so was considered anti-American and posed a risk to his family's safety. He took it a step further and stared down the intimidation by inviting those who threatened him to his home, announcing his address on public radio. He ran for local office on a platform of equity and dignity for the common man and won. My enduring mental caricature of him is drawn with both fists in the air, tightly clenched.

Propelled very consciously by my need for resilience narrative in my time off, I recently watched the 2016 drama *Chosen*. The story centers on a Jewish attorney turned forced laborer in Hungary at the end

of World War II. In keeping his deathbed promise to his beloved wife, and perhaps for no other reason, this man who once actively shunned the resistance became its leader. He went as far as dressing up as an SS officer to free opposition fighters, and in an emotional performance you are transported with him through the process of becoming the most reluctant of heroes, a title he most assuredly rejects even into old age. He acted out of necessity, perhaps, but more than anything out of obligation to a simple abiding love. He could not regard himself as a hero when action was his only choice.

To this, I can relate. The dominant rhetoric of this pandemic has been, quite positively, one of admiration and respect for frontline workers including doctors, and I am bolstered by the warmth and support I have received. Every act of kindness has nourished and renewed me, preparing me for another tiring round of gearing up to face an invisible enemy, redefining all the ways I care for patients, watching patients suffer while I often have little to offer, then systematically

scrubbing down to keep this scourge out of my house and away from my family. I walk past signs on my way to the hospital proclaiming me and my colleagues heroic. "Heroes work here," they say, punctuated with other inspirational messages and bright tokens of hope. Even my own neighbors have joined in, leaving me sweet messages of support in the form of posters and giant chalk drawings on the driveway

to surprise me as I pull in, wilted and contaminated, after an exhausting shift. "Hometown hero," they say. "Thank you for your service."

Hero?

I wonder what my grandfather would think of me claiming this title. Would he find it as ill-fitting as the extra-large surgical gown and comically oversized face shield I now wear while intubating patients in respiratory distress? Worse, would it be a slap in the face of the *real* heroes like him, the war veterans, and those architects of our nation who very intentionally risked their lives in the service of that vision? Those who had the chutzpah to invite their enemies into their homes with a grin, middle fingers drawn.

These questions are all conjecture because my grandfather died before I was born, and my knowledge of him exists entirely in hand-me-down stories and the few pictures I have seen. One of the most poignant of these stories is one my father tells from his own boyhood, when he went to the mine to meet his father after work on a cold winter evening. He waited with great anticipation for several minutes as the elevators lifted the miners from the raw heat of the deep earth to

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the cool surface above. When the doors opened, my grandfather emerged, blackened from head to toe by and surrounded by a massive cloud of condensation. In front of the setting sun, it appeared as if he was on fire.

The jagged stone and precious metals my grandfather mined were used to build this country from the ground up, but so too was his ethos of collective action and responsibility. He broke knuckles fighting but was also known to quietly recite Shakespearean sonnets as he broke rock. As much as I admire him, I have struggled to know my grandfather, and grasping at his memory during this pandemic has led me inevitably down a path of comparative scrutiny on heroism. For sure, I stand in a mighty shadow.

When I am fully gowned up, I look startlingly unlike myself, unlike any human, really, to the point that I have had patients fearfully

recoil during examinations. I have found it helpful to carry a picture of myself to show to patients, so they know who is caring for them. We both smile beneath our masks once we have been properly introduced, and I can continue my evaluation as they visibly relax. It feels like a remnant of life before the pandemic, an intentional reminder of the why behind the how we will get through this. A bit of light protest, even.

At the end of my shift, I slowly remove my mask, taking care not to contaminate myself. As I stand at the sink in front of the mirror, scrubbing my hands and humming a familiar melody to keep time, I study the deep indentations across my nose—my grandfather's nose—left by the mask. "Is this the face of a hero?" I ask. The question makes me uncomfortable, and today I do not have an answer. I take a deep, unimpeded breath for the first time that day, my lungs clear, my heart steady.

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**Published Online:** July 16, 2020.

doi:[10.1001/jama.2020.12779](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.12779)

**Conflict of Interest Disclosures:** None reported.