

ART OF MEDICINE

Every Good Doctor Is Followed By A Good Angel

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The title of this artwork is, “Every Good Doctor is Followed by a Good Angel”. My wife and I commissioned this painting from a favorite resident artist, Mary Sharon McGinley-Nally, in Gainesville, Florida in the 1980’s. We gave the artist the above saying and asked for her art as she felt it from that title message. The triptych picture we received depicts a doctor at the bedside attending to a young girl with a broken arm. An angel is behind him with a hand resting on his shoulder. Two approving angels look on at the tableau in the center panel.



The title of this artwork is *Every Good Doctor is Followed by a Good Angel*.

My wife and I commissioned this painting from a favorite artist-in-residence, Mary Sharon McGinley-Nally, in Gainesville, Florida in 1982. We asked the artist to create a piece reflecting her interpretation of this saying. She gave us a triptych picture depicting a doctor at the bedside attending to a young girl with a broken arm. An angel behind him rests a hand on his shoulder. Two approving angels look on at the tableau in the center panel.

Exactly 50 years ago, I stood before the halls of medicine and began my journey as a new medical student. It did not take long before the crush of work and imposter syndrome brought me migraine headaches and

depression. I learned to seek solace and escape just down the street in night classes at the Corcoran School of Art and spent weekends studying masterpieces at the National Gallery of Art.

If art can steady a doctor's soul, I found an anchor of idealism in the art and life of a German artist from the first half of the tumultuous Twentieth Century, Kathe Kollwitz.¹ Her stark black-and-white woodcuts and drawings captured the heartbreak and suffering of the impoverished masses oppressed by World Wars and authoritarian regimes. She showed me a path where you can never turn your heart away from the overwhelming undercurrent of sadness within medicine.

A contemporary of Albert Einstein in protesting against the rise of fascism, Kollwitz was ultimately repressed and vilified by the Nazi Third Reich, and while her fame prevented her extermination, her late career was erased by Nazi suppression. Kollwitz's artistic voice would be lost in the tumult of World War 2. She passed away a few days before the end of the war.

While studying Kollwitz's artwork, I stumbled upon a different artist's black-and-white woodcut that touched a chord in me. Titled *A Good Angel Follows a Good Doctor*, the artist had portrayed a doctor trudging to a house call amidst a rainy night. A silent angel followed along holding a protective umbrella for the physician.

Rather than a literal religious angel, the saying "Every good doctor is followed by a good angel" could evoke a more profound symbolic humility. The artwork was not the famous, grand anatomy theatre of Rembrandt's monumental painting, *The Anatomy Lesson*. This saying reminds me that most of my good medical deeds will never to be acknowledged, and for that, they should be cherished even more. The angel stands for the lonely grace that comforts a doctor even when there is no grateful patients or colleagues to witness the depth of the doctor's efforts.

I had expected the McGinley-Nally piece to reflect the same somber message that touched my heart in the pieces of Kathe Kollwitz. Instead, I was presented with a commissioned artwork exuding joy and whimsy. The doctor is holding up a magical healing star for a peaceful, smiling patient.

How do we reconcile these two perspectives, and how do they speak to us in the foreboding descent of our society towards authoritarianism? Are the angels the embodiment of hope in the face of a Promethean modern world? Whether our patient encounters are stern or lighthearted, our doctorly efforts imbue hope in our connection with our patients. So many of these caring efforts in my 50 years of medicine have been lost even from my own memory.

¹ Clarke JA. Käthe Kollwitz: An art of resistance. The Art Institute of Chicago. May 4, 2021. Accessed August 25, 2025. <https://www.artic.edu/articles/910/kathe-kollwitz-an-art-of-resistance>.

Many of my physician contemporaries have passed into retirement or have died, and our shared heroics have slipped away. But the angels are our humble witnesses, a symbolic storehouse of all these good deeds. No good deed is ever truly lost.

Please send your own reflections on this proverb and artwork to txfmrj@gmail.com, including “Art in Medicine” in the Subject Line.

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