

REFLECTIONS

The path of healing: What a cracked bucket can teach young surgeons

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Abstract

This narrative explores the journey of young paediatric surgeons through the metaphor of a cracked bucket that inadvertently waters flowers along its path. The story illuminates how perceived imperfections and vulnerabilities in medical practice often create spaces for deeper healing beyond technical excellence. By embracing both surgical precision and human compassion, trainees discover that their limitations can become strengths, fostering holistic care that addresses not just the physical ailment, but the emotional needs of patients and families.

Keywords: paediatric surgery, surgical training, mentorship, compassionate care, medical humanities

In the hushed corridors of the Children's Hospital, the senior paediatric surgeon watched as her team of surgical residents huddled around a table in the break room, their faces etched with exhaustion. It was 2 am, and they had just completed an emergency procedure on a four-year-old boy with a ruptured appendix. The surgery had gone well, but the case had been complex, with unexpected complications that tested the young doctors' resolve.

"Some days, I wonder if I'm cut out for this," whispered Dr PeeGee, the most promising of the first-year residents. He hadn't made any mistakes during the procedure, but his hands had trembled slightly when complications arose. "I keep thinking about all the things that could have gone wrong."

The senior surgeon recognised the familiar weight of doubt — she had carried it herself during her own training. Rather than offering platitudes, she smiled and said, "Let me tell you a story my grandfather, a surgeon in rural India for forty years, once told me."

There once was a farmer who carried water to his home every day using two buckets suspended from a pole across his shoulders. One of the buckets had a small crack and leaked continuously throughout the journey. The other was perfect, delivering a full portion of water each trip.

For two years, the farmer made the daily journey from the stream to his house. The perfect bucket always delivered a full measure of water, but the cracked bucket arrived only half-full. The perfect bucket was proud of its performance, having fulfilled its purpose completely. But the cracked bucket was ashamed of its imperfection, feeling that it was failing at the one thing it was made to do.

One day, the cracked bucket spoke to the farmer: "I want to apologise. Because of my flaw, you never get a full day's work from me."

The farmer smiled gently. "Tomorrow, as we return from the stream, I want you to look down at the path on your side."

The next day, as they made their return journey, the cracked bucket noticed beautiful wildflowers growing along its side of the path — vibrant violets, golden sunflowers, and delicate daisies dancing in the breeze.

"Did you notice the flowers?" the farmer asked. "They grow only on your side of the path. I've always known about your crack, so I planted flower seeds along your side. Every day as we walk back from the stream, you've been watering them. Without you being exactly the way you are, these flowers couldn't exist to brighten our lives and provide nectar for the bees and butterflies."

As the senior surgeon finished her story, the break room fell silent. Then Dr PeeGee spoke, his voice barely above a whisper: "But as surgeons, we can't afford to be cracked buckets. Lives depend on us being perfect."

"That's where you're wrong," she replied, gently but firmly. "Surgery isn't about being a perfect vessel — it's about understanding your unique strengths and limitations, and working within them to provide healing."

She gestured toward the surgical floor. "Remember that father last week? The one who was terrified about his daughter's spine surgery? You were the one who sat with him for an hour, explaining everything in Tamil, connecting with him in a way none of the rest of us could. That connection, that compassion — that's water seeding flowers along your path."

Another resident, who had been quiet until now, looked up. "During my rotation in oncology, I witnessed the loss of three paediatric patients in one month. I almost quit. But then one of the mothers wrote to thank me for making her son's last weeks comfortable and dignified. She said my 'gentle presence' had been a gift to them both."

The senior surgeon nodded. "Each of you will face cases you can't solve, patients you can't save. The crack isn't your technical skill — it's the human limitation we all share in the face of illness and mortality. But those limitations, those vulnerabilities, create spaces where other kinds of healing can grow."

She pulled out her tablet and showed them follow-up photos from previous patients — children now thriving years after their surgeries. "We see patients at their most vulnerable moments. They don't just need our technical excellence — they need our humanity. Your so-called imperfections — your doubts, your sensitivities — they're not weaknesses. They're what enable you to notice a parent's unspoken fear, to explain complex procedures in ways children understand, to hold space for grief when outcomes aren't what we hoped."

The youngest resident, who had been observing his first major procedure that night, spoke up. "My mother has a chronic illness. Growing up, we had a doctor who never remembered her name or looked at her when he spoke. He might have been technically brilliant, but he made her feel invisible. That's why I went into medicine — not just to fix bodies, but to see people."

"Exactly," the senior surgeon said. "The technical skills matter enormously — we must strive for excellence in every procedure. But paediatric surgery isn't just about small organs and delicate tissues. It's about the whole child, the whole family."

Six months later, the senior surgeon found herself in the hospital garden, sitting beside a small fountain. It was a rare quiet moment in her hectic schedule. She watched as Dr PeeGee approached with a family — parents and a young girl of about seven, her abdomen still bearing the healing scars of the complex liver surgery he had led the week before.

The girl was planting something in a specially designated patch of the garden — a tradition for patients who wanted to mark their healing journey. Dr PeeGee knelt beside her, helping her small hands pat the soil around the seedling.

Later, when the family had gone, he joined his mentor by the fountain.

"Sunflowers," he said, gesturing toward the planting. "Her choice. She said they reminded her of me because I was 'bright like the sun' during her darkest days." He laughed, a little embarrassed.

"You've found your path," the senior surgeon observed.

"I think I have," he agreed. "I was so focused on being the perfect surgeon that I couldn't see the garden I was helping to create." He paused. "I still aim for perfection in the OR, but I've stopped beating myself up about the cases that haunt me. Instead, I try to learn from them."

She smiled. "The technical skills — the perfect bucket — they're essential. But it's often our cracked places that water the garden of healing that extends beyond the operating room."

As they walked back toward the hospital, they passed other doctors, nurses, patients, and families in the garden — all part of the ecosystem of care that flourished in the most challenging environment imaginable.

"Even on the hardest days," Dr PeeGee reflected, "when we lose a patient or face an impossible case, something meaningful grows along the path. Sometimes it's a medical breakthrough. Sometimes it's the comfort we provide to a grieving family. Sometimes it's simply the courage to return the next day, to try again, to carry water despite the cracks."

The senior surgeon nodded, watching the sun glint off the windows of the paediatric ward. "That's the secret that sustains a lifetime in medicine. We're all cracked vessels, doing the best we can with what we have. And sometimes, that's exactly what our patients need us to be."

Note: This creation, imaginary though, is a reflection of the author's life experiences as a mentor for the young paediatric surgeons and explores how they can find meaning in their careers by embracing both technical excellence and human vulnerability — understanding that perceived imperfections often enable the most profound forms of healing.

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