



OF ARMRESTS AND PERSPECTIVE

On a recent flight from London to Dublin, I was tired and looking forward to getting home after a long and stressful day. The flight was full, and there was not much space for everyone's carry-on luggage. Within seconds of take-off, the gentleman sitting next to me in the middle seat used his elbow to push mine off of the armrest. A war for the armrest ensued, with both of us trying to claim the territory, but he was not giving up the fight. He was about 10 years older than me but larger in size. He was strong and stubborn, but I can be, too.

I abandoned my plan to sleep on the flight in favor of gaining revenge on this man who believed that he owned the armrest. I waited for the right moment. About 15 minutes later, he fell asleep, and his downward force on the armrest relented for a few seconds. This was my chance. I placed my elbow onto the armrest behind his and dislodged his elbow. He woke from his sleep and realized that he had been out-manuevered.

I could see his thoughts racing as he contemplated his strategy. He *accidentally* dropped something on the floor in front of him and asked me to pick it up. I obliged, and by the time I retrieved the object, he had regained control of the armrest. At this point I thought, "Is that how you repay someone's good deed?" I plotted his downfall. Ten minutes later, the flight attendant came by, and when he reached up to get his coffee I retook the armrest. Incredibly, less than a minute later, he gained it back after I reached up to claim my own hot beverage. "This guy is good," echoed in my mind.

It is amazing how time flies when you are preoccupied, and before long we descended into Dublin. I was resigned to the fact that he had won the armrest war, and I started thinking about the potential length of the taxi queue.

To my surprise, the man asked, "Are you coming for the weekend, or do you live in Dublin?" I replied that I was returning from a meeting and that I live in Dublin, and then I returned the question. He told me that he just spent 4 excellent days visiting with his 2-year-old grandson and his son-in-law. He said his daughter passed away 9 months earlier at the age of 29 from an aggressive form of cancer. He had been attempting to help his grandson and son-in-law to get their lives back together again. I was overwhelmed by a sense of pettiness and shame at just how territorial I had become over an *armrest*.

The story I have recounted is fictional but not original. I recently heard it told by the author Paul Howard at a short story reading and was touched. We are all so engulfed in our own lives that we often fail to consider the motivations and personal stories of the people that we meet. The world seems to have become less tolerant, especially of differences. As doctors, we probably see more people and engage in more personal discussions than most nondoctors, so perhaps we may be forgiven for becoming blasé or insensitive. Reflecting on what motivates someone or what personal battles he or she may face, however, can help us to provide a better service. After all, the eyes that we treat belong to patients with real lives and real stories. I plan to endeavor to be a better listener and a better human being thanks to Mr. Howard's short story. ■

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