

Sharing Life's Work

Jacob H. Rooksby

Last fall semester I did something I never thought I would do while teaching: I cried in class.

One week into my dream job as a tenure-track professor at a law school, my wife was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. She was also seven months pregnant with our first child. Just as we had happily pondered our chances of both finding jobs in the same city, we soon faced grimmer questions: Why cancer? Why now? We are not even in our mid-30s. No family history. Healthy habits. What were the odds?

September was a blur as we came to grips with the diagnosis and how it would change us. Weeks passed when it seemed like all we did was shuttle from one doctor's office to another, strangers in our new city. My wife, five years a physician, resisted the role of patient. And I, a new professor, struggled with my reflex role of student. I had to master a new lexicon (cancer "staging," sentinel nodes, estrogen receptors) and parse the advice of unfamiliar experts. With her scientific training and being ever the optimist, my wife came to see her disease and the array of clinical options as presenting an "interesting case." An inveterate humanist as well as lawyer, I searched for meaning in circumstances that I saw as tragic and depressing.

My wife began chemotherapy scant weeks after diagnosis. Determined to carry on as normally as possible, we worked at our new jobs essentially as planned, resisting the gentle urging of concerned colleagues to put our professional lives on hold. On two occasions I accompanied my wife for her 7:00 a.m. chemo infusions, only to dash away three hours later so I could teach my 10:30 class on intellectual property law.

I told my students about my daughter's pending arrival, but not about my wife's cancer or her treatment. When our radiant and healthy daughter was born halfway through the semester, the students in my small class seemed to appreciate the photos I shared of her. Throughout November, they asked me to bring in more. I resisted out of a nagging concern about mixing too much of the personal and the professional. Nearly every week an unexpected familiarity would affirm the importance of being friendly without being confused for a peer.

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But I soon became fretful that I was hiding a part of my life that my students would eventually learn anyway—and perhaps read my reticence as mistrust or shame. Would I show them more photos of my daughter if my stricken wife did not have cancer? Would it be wrong of me to burden them with such news, which had no relevance to the course's subject matter?

I prepared for the final class of my first semester of teaching with a PowerPoint that included three photos with the disclosure I had been avoiding: the first two of my daughter, and the third of my wife holding her, smiling through the terror that envelops us. By the second photo, I started to choke up knowing what was coming. I continued to cry and said nothing as I showed the third. The students' smiles faded as they saw the cheery but bald and frail mother holding her child and they began to construct a narrative still in mid-arc. I finally managed to wipe back my tears and tell a bit of our story. Then I moved on with the review class I owed them. A scene from *The Paper Chase* this was not.

During finals one of my quieter students came to my office unannounced to say that the class wanted to give me a photograph of my family. She asked if I would be willing to make some available so that they could have one framed.

After a few days' hesitation, I emailed her a link without expectations, knowing that good intentions often evaporate on their own. After all, my students probably felt as awkward as I did about crossing boundaries. But at least the request had prompted me to a richer perspective on copyright law. As we had covered earlier in the semester, distributing an embodiment of a work does not automatically transfer copyright ownership in the underlying work. Yet by sharing downloadable copies of the photos with the class, I felt as if I were surrendering ownership of our family's struggle, releasing rightful claim to our private lives. Even if this were not true from a legal standpoint, I took comfort in the honest transparency that came from this further act of revelation.

Over the holidays a package arrived containing a canvas print of a portrait of my wife, my daughter, and myself. The image in black and white features my wife's and my bare feet, which are outstretched on our bed, with our baby's tiny feet in between and lifted off the bed, as if trying to imitate the pose the photographer had coaxed from her parents. Our smiling faces appear out of focus in the background.

The canvas now hangs in my office as a reminder of many things: the resilience of my wife's spirit, the capacity for joy in the face of adversity, and the reassurance that our baby is mercifully oblivious to the drama her elders cannot avoid. It also serves as reminder of why I entered this profession. Education invites exposure, for teacher as much as for student.

Postscript: After months of chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation, my wife is further on the road to recovery, and her prognosis is good. We have learned much about ourselves and others during this journey, which has allowed me to connect in new ways with students who are facing their own life hardships. I share with them the advice that best helped me grapple with the emotional pains and indignities we confronted along the way: never assume that any emotion is the last.



Photo by Mary Beth Miller Photography