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Sacred moments in the therapy gym

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I haven't perched in a tree waiting for Bigfoot, or spent a morning with binoculars in a rowboat on Loch Ness. But I recently had a ringside seat for one of those elusive rehab therapy triumphs — the kind I always hear about, but had never personally witnessed — and the moment felt kind of ... sacred.

They happen all the time, of course. I've interviewed dozens of grateful patients and dedicated therapists over the years, and it's a great privilege to be a scribe and megaphone for their stories of near-miraculous recovery achievements.

Those triumphs almost always follow the same trajectory, yet never lose their magic.

A senior suffers a life-shattering health event, and enters a post-acute rehab facility to begin the long, uncertain road back. From the devastation of this unwelcome adversity, motivated and supported by an incredible therapist, he or she achieves recovery goals that once seemed impossible.

Experiences like this are as common as they are inspirational — but the difference was that this time, I finally I got to be there as just such a moment unfolded.

The patient and John, her therapist, were practicing walking on uneven surfaces in an outdoor therapy courtyard. The session seemed ordinary enough, but he had a surprise for her — they were going to try the stairs.

He knew the laundry room in her home was down a flight, and how badly she wanted to learn to navigate them again. But judging from her reaction to the idea, it was clear she hadn't planned to start today.

It was only two steps up, but to her, it must have seemed like El Capitan. I could see the fear in her eyes as she looked at the stairs, then back to him. "I'm scared," she said in an unsteady voice, but she trusted him, and decided to give it a shot.

With enormous effort, and John right behind her, she got one foot up, then two. Then another, and then two. Standing at the top, I could see her literally shaking with amazement and relief. Truth be told, I was a little weak in the knees myself, just from seeing her surprise and excitement at the unexpected achievement.

For those of us still enjoying the temporary luxury of fully functional muscles and limbs, those two little steps would seem trivial, passing without notice. But to a patient like this one, battling to get some small semblance of her life back, it was a mile — and a milestone.



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That's what made the moment so meaningful, and dare I say it again, sacred.

Later, back inside the therapy gym, I asked how she felt when she realized what John wanted her to do. "I was flabbergasted and frightened," she said. "I thought that was way down the line."

And how did she feel about it now?

"I'm ready to try it again."

"You did a great job," said John, kneeling beside her. "I'm proud of you."

How did he convince you to do it, I wondered?

"Well, you have to be able to trust your therapist, and I do," she said, adding, "He's my savior," without a hint of intended hyperbole.

Clearly, John had established a partnership with almost mystical powers of motivation, and now with those two steps behind her, she believed anything was possible. So I asked him how it felt to hear such appreciation and awe.

"It's uplifting," he responded. "It's why I do what I do, and it makes me happy to be part of a profession that can really help people."

Ending my impromptu interrogation, I thanked them for the honor of being a witness. Days later, I'm still savoring the experience — and pondering what makes a truly great therapist.

It's one thing to learn therapy techniques and modalities, and how to deliver them well. But it seems to me that the ability to establish unconditional trust is where the magic really happens.

The genius is in the gift for empathy and perception, the ability to understand and articulate what patients want, maybe even better than they do. It's in knowing just when to push and when to praise. It's in leveraging an almost spooky ability to see inside their souls and intuitively know what they need, and what will get them there.

When it's right, there's really only one word for it. Sacred.

Things I Think is written by Gary Tetz, a national Silver Medalist and regional Gold and Silver Medal winner in the Association of Business Press Editors (ASBPE) awards program. He has amused, informed and sometimes befuddled long-term care readers worldwide since his debut with the former SNALF.com at the end of a previous century. He is a multimedia consultant for Consonus Healthcare Services in Portland, OR.

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