

From Whitney to Emerson



WHITNEY HOUSTON has died at the age of 48” the headline blared. Whitney Houston—I remember her as young, vibrant, limitless. In her prime it seemed as though her voice was capable of anything. She stirred our nation, too, during her national anthem at Super Bowl XXV in 1991. My memory of that moment, with our nation at war, was of this beautiful young woman stepping forward representing strength and patriotism through her voice. My kids didn’t know who she was, so I called them over and pulled that moment up on YouTube. It is still an amazing scene. And then, of course, her life and career went in a different direction. Drugs, reckless behavior, and an abusive husband created a life that ultimately ruined that pristine voice. A symbol for the nation became such a sad story.

Her stirring national anthem reminded me of another timeless sporting event musical moment. Marvin Gaye sang the national anthem at the 1983 NBA All Star game. I saw him at the Greek Theater one summer with my future wife,

Diane, and I couldn’t believe the effect he had on the women there that evening. He had an amazing ability to connect. So, I called my kids over to the computer again and pulled up that 1983 performance. In contrast to Whitney, he was soft, sweet, and playfully happy while being perfectly in control. A master in his prime. It was soon thereafter that his life was also taken too early by a shot from his father who had mental disease and mistook his son for an intruder.

This sad story brings to mind Michael Jackson. Another performer who at one time seemingly ruled the musical world but had a life filled with sadness, drug abuse, and other kinds of abuse. He was hoping to make a comeback, was pushing his limits, and pushed the limits of what a doctor should do. Dr. Conrad Murray allowed his employer, Jackson, to abrogate his responsibility as a physician—to do something unsafe for his patient. So much talent, so much abuse, and ultimately, so much sadness.

This brings me to the story of Emerson. On a recent Sunday morning, a group I belong to was serving breakfast

at a homeless shelter. As part of the deal, we were encouraged to sit and share the meal together. That’s where I met Emerson—a 40-year-old man who has been a teacher in high school and junior college. He lost his job due to the economy and found himself hitting the streets looking for work with his room and board taken care of for 60 days. This was a tough time and a tough situation especially for one who had been relatively well off.

Emerson didn’t look at it that way though. He told me of his upbringing in the Bronx without a supportive mother or father. He walked to school in the middle of the street as one side of the street had “hookers” and the other side drug dealers. Despite this difficult environment, Emerson remembers being “saved” by a group called “upward bound” where disadvantaged youth were taken to the country for summer camp. He says he was shown how life could be different and that was his motivation to rise up, get an education, and move out of the ghetto. Ironically, Emerson stated proudly, “I would never be where I am today without that upward bound program.” And so, even though he’s in a homeless shelter, he knows his life is, and has been, so much better than it would have been in his old neighborhood. He was grateful for where he went when he left his neighborhood and where he expected to go. After our meal, he grabbed his backpack and an apple, and then left, hitting the streets looking for work. His is the optimism I want to carry forward. He’s had set backs but is still grateful, hopeful, and putting in the effort for a better future.

From Emerson to Whitney, I am reminded of the importance of decision-making, attitude, and their impact on one’s future. The future of medicine is in jeopardy today. Doctors must make *conscientious decisions* to positively shape their future careers. With hard work and good decisions we can work our way out of these tough times to build a secure and strong future for our patients and our profession. More than ever, we need to come together. A strong LACMA and CMA will help us get there.

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