



## Going Back IN

*Barbara Huntington*

I recognize the name that comes up on my phone, one of my former premedical students. In the second or two it takes to press accept, I think about her persistence as a ballerina in an internationally known ballet company and the military discipline that kept her focused on her goal to become a physician in spite of the obstacles thrown at her. My delight probably echoes in my voice.

“Lisa, good to hear from you.”

“Hi, Barb, just wanted to call to check if you are okay during this time.”

During this time, Covid-19 time, hunkered down time. I don’t tell her about my inertia, my worry about her and my other students in the front lines of the disease. I stop musing and concentrate on the dedicated, compassionate woman I am speaking with.

“Hey, Lisa. Been stuck in the house for almost two months, but I have Tashi.” I look down at the brown eyes of my patient dog, scratch her ears, grateful for her presence. “We’re both getting fat. Where are you practicing?”

“Arizona, small town on Route 66. We’re jammed.”

“But you are okay? Is there a lot of Covid-19 at your hospital?”

“Well, I did get sicker than I’ve ever been. Could have been Covid-19, but we didn’t have enough tests. Last week I wasn’t sure I’d make it. I’m still fatigued.”

“Oh, No!”

“Yeah, that stuff is bad, lost some friends and some older patients I’ve known for a while. We’re a small town, and we’re not getting the equipment we need. Just bought my own supplies now that I am ready to go back. Already had to fight with the admins to let me use them.

I remember this intelligent, tough woman from her undergraduate days: a former ballerina who overcame injuries as a bike racer in Olympic trials, a woman with a black belt in Kendo, who helped open Japanese sword fighting to women, a Sea World Pearl Diver, an EMT, former president of our Military Medicine Association. I pity any hospital administrator trying to thwart her. I’m beginning to realize how much she’s playing down the situation, but I just say, “But you won, right?”

“Yeah, I’m going back in tomorrow wearing the whole kit and caboodle.”

In my mind I see every war hero in every war movie I ever watched deciding to “go back in.” No matter what the odds. I already know how she will answer my next question.

“Are you sure you’ve regained enough strength? Sounds like you really did have the virus, right?”

“Well, we don’t have enough docs or nurses. If my interns want to go in with Covid-19 patients, I’m not going to let them do it.”

My thoughts return to all my dedicated premedical students, viral loads, lack of PPE. Some have reassured me on Facebook. Others have not checked in at all. I tell myself they are just too busy, but I often wake up in the middle of the night, quarantine dreams, worried about them.

“Well, Barb, I need to get going. I’m calling all the people I want to thank, and I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you. I went through some tough times trying to get into medical school.”

“You know my answer to that one, Lisa. It was your brilliance, your persistence and your compassion that got you into medical school. I had the privilege of getting to watch you do it.”

“Thanks Barb, I knew you’d say that, but I really want to thank everyone who helped me along the way, you know, just in case.”

Though I want to play mother and tell her to take more time to recover, I know it is futile. I tell her I love her and implore her to stay well. She says good-bye and hangs up.

Tashi puts her head in my lap and I whisper a thank you for her presence. But I feel an ache in the center of my chest as I envision Lisa going back in. I know what she means by “just in case.”

