



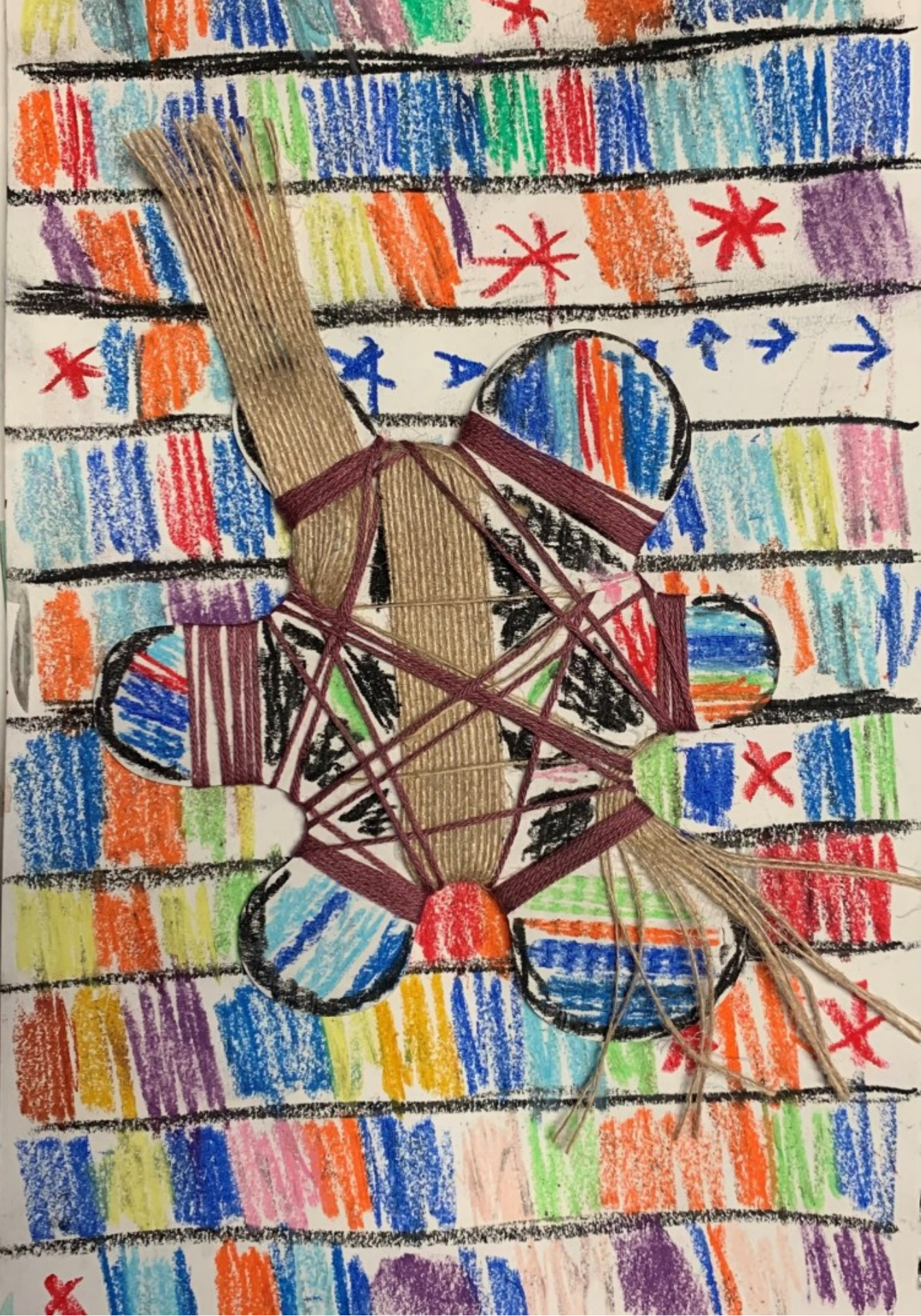
Under the Mask

CORAL Art Group
March 2021

This book is dedicated to

Pandemic-Era Health Care Workers

Time to Take a Breath



I began this page as not one but rather many stressful events that have taken place over my career. The common denominator of these events was that I felt a lack of control and inadequacy. Following these events, I will spend weeks and months nitpicking and shaming myself for not anticipating what I rationally know was an unforeseeable event. These events have created an internal monologue that all the nurses around me are the “real” nurses, They are always sure of themselves and know exactly what to do in every scenario. They never freeze or panic. They know the secret code like an old video game hack (up down left right B A start) to fix every bad situation. I feel like despite graduating nursing school at the top of my class, I somehow missed the lesson on this secret code. I have all the colors and materials as my peers. I have just enough to appear like a “real nurse” but It’s misshapen and bound by the ties of my own insecurities. I didn’t realize until I shared this piece how distinctly universal this feeling is among health professionals. Under our masks, many of us have imposter syndrome to some degree. I wanted to recognize my personal growth in the piece as well, so I left the binding ties fraying at the end. Slowly freeing me and reminding myself of what I have been all along- a “real nurse”.

-a Pediatric
Nurse

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This hand is made from one of my “nursing brains” where I write down all of the patient information, notes, tasks, medications, vital signs, and overall schedule for all my patients in a shift. By the end of my shift, my paper is filled with scribbles, torn up, wrinkled, and stained (sometimes with coffee... sometimes body fluids). Sometimes looking at the brain is overwhelming when I see all the tasks I need to do for everyone. Too many tasks and not enough time to connect with my patients and lighten their burdens like I wish I could.

One particularly busy shift like this, I was carrying a mannequin arm that we use to teach families about central lines. A young boy who was my patient saw me with it and started cracking up. The rest of the day I did all my medication passes and cares for him using the dummy arm. I even took a blood pressure on the darn thing. It became our ongoing joke that lasted several shifts. When that family discharged home, the young boy made me a thank you card shaped with a tracing of his arm. That experience reminds me that through all the tasks and busyness- nursing is first and foremost a relationship. It’s not something that I need to schedule in between tasks on my to do list. Even in the busy I am connecting with people and trying to lighten their burdens and soften their pain. -a

Pediatric Nurse



"Often, I feel as though I can only put one foot in front of the other; only see what is two feet in front of me; only then to find myself in a foreign maze, not knowing how I ever got from A to B.

There is no control in this way of living, and one knows hope can only serve its purpose for so long. So, I was surprised by the amount of space that was created by the simple of act of drawing a personal boundary...How freeing it felt to command the space that one deserves and to realize that we all have the right to control the external pressures that crowd our ability to just be."

-a Resident





Behind this mask, it has been
really difficult to practice self-care.
I teach others how to cope better
everyday - how can I feel like I'm
failing at it? I felt lost last year.
This mask acts as a cover or a wall
sometimes, protecting me from feeling
and sometimes allowing me to hide.

But I remembered a piece of myself
a few weeks ago. I could feel this place.
Feel the warmth of the amazing sunset.
Smell the salt in the air. Feel the mist
of the ocean. Hear family, friends, and
joy. The most special place on Earth!
Where I am so disconnected from the
everyday but feel so connected to
SO MUCH LIFE ☺



I hid behind my mask of tears...
but it felt like an explosion inside me.

The moment you told me
it all became REAL.

I broke into so many pieces
I really broke

The moments of numb were just fog

My chest hurt
My back ached
My throat closed
Everything hurts

Its hard to sweep up every little
shard of glass that continues to
inflict this hurt

... almost 3 years later



Warm

Hot

18



Love

Trust

Strong

Hope



Nursing

Strong yet weak.

Loved yet hated.

Trusted yet loved.

Hope.

Bright yet dark.

Calm yet chaotic.

Neat yet messy.

Necessary yet disposable.

Yellow to black,

Nurses never turn their backs.



Bright, Reflective, Centered

A flame burning strong amidst it all

A supportive workplace, adequate pay, holistic care,

Helping patients heal, having fun, being appreciated.

Upward growth - a handful of challenge.

My Ideal Workplace.



The expectation to be competent and smart. Flexible. Professional. Listeners. Problem solvers. Organized. Understanding. Kind. Computer-savvy charting extraordinaires. Multitasking wonder humans with six hands to balance it all while moonlighting as housekeepers and servers at times. Keepers of the details. Hand holders. Family and visitor bouncers. Plus so many more.

Mask monitors.

To some degree, the mask has made it easier for us to hide the person behind our job title. There is limited space for all the emotions that go with our jobs. No real priority on self care because that is not how our system was built.

The community we've created by being vulnerable and open to sharing our experiences from different specialties helped me recognize what's under this mask.

-a Labor and Delivery Nurse



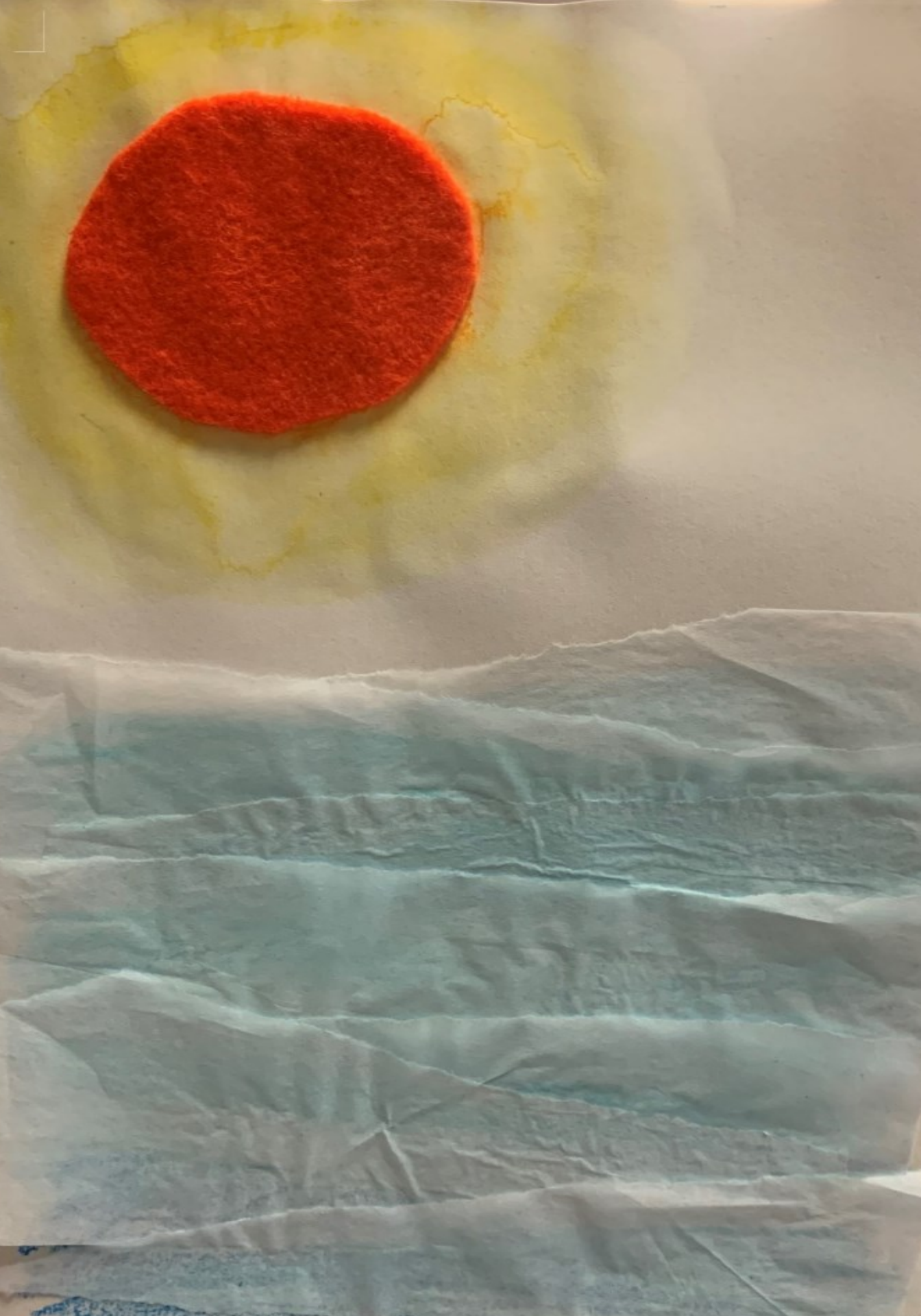
We put signs on doors of patients who have had a fetal or neonatal demise - they're usually a teardrop or a figure of a mother to signal to other staff members to be aware of the loss. It's always bothered me, even though I understand the thinking behind it. It somehow feels like it closes the parents off in some way. It's difficult to find words to say to them - they didn't get to meet or know their baby on the outside. I hope they feel the love and empathy from my presence and actions. I carry each and every loss. This part of my job has and will probably always weigh heavily.

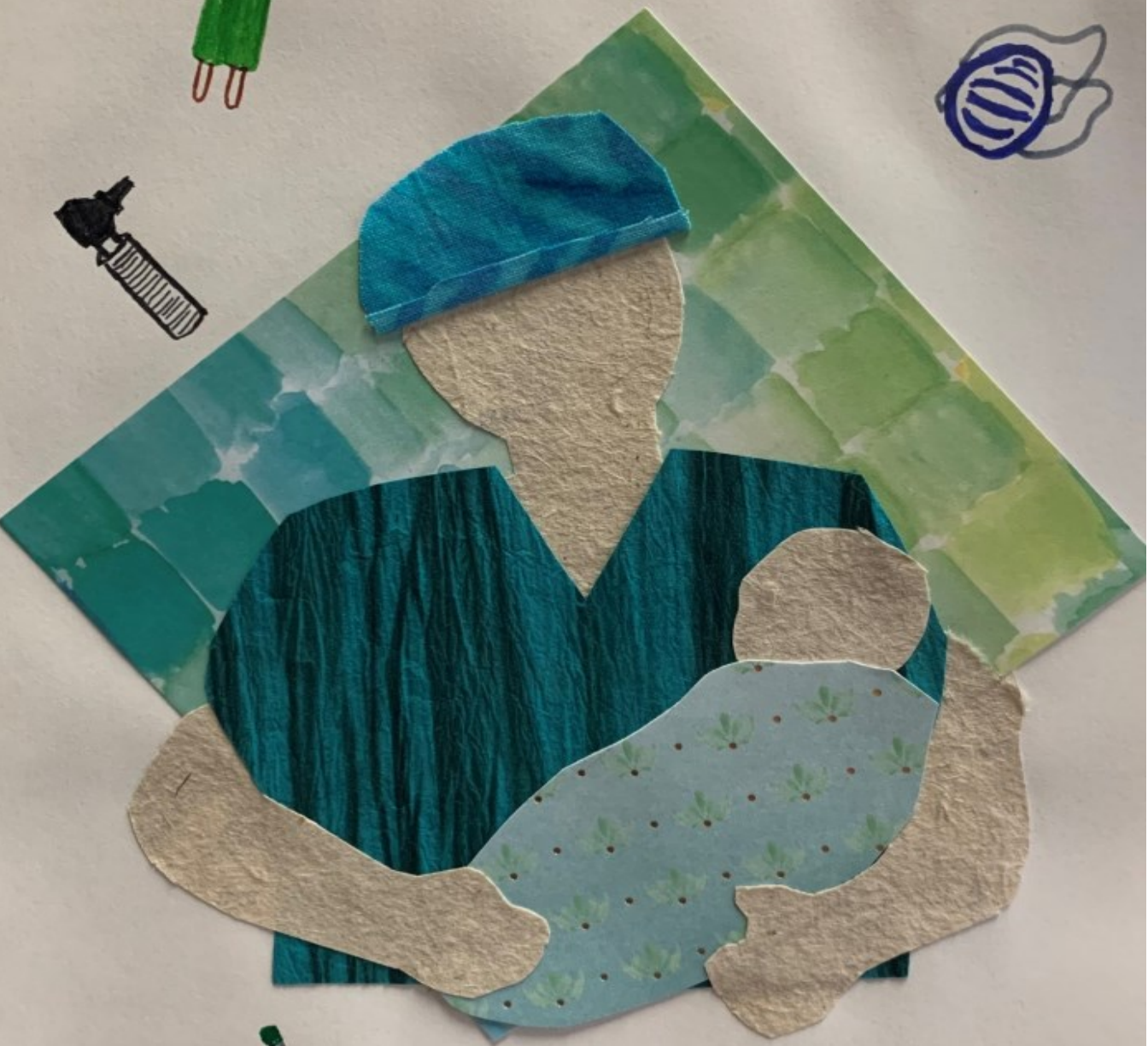
-a Labor and Delivery Nurse



To me, *Under the Mask* represents what we all have been experiencing individually and collectively over the last year with the pandemic. Work and life were hard enough; and the pandemic brought so much upheaval personally and professionally. I've seen so much resilience, but also so many people brought to lows that I've never witnessed before. The art I chose for this book represents an integration of what I've learned and experienced in this class, and my own resiliency strategies. In times of stress, I turn inward and spend a lot of time thinking through the stress or conflict, through the pain or anger, to regain perspective and get back to a happy and caring person who can turn outward to support others through their difficult times. I also believe that gratitude is important to keeping perspective and staying fulfilled. Listening to people's stories in this class and seeing their amazing art brings me to a place of feeling grateful. I'm especially grateful for the amazing health care workers I met.

-an Infectious Disease Physician



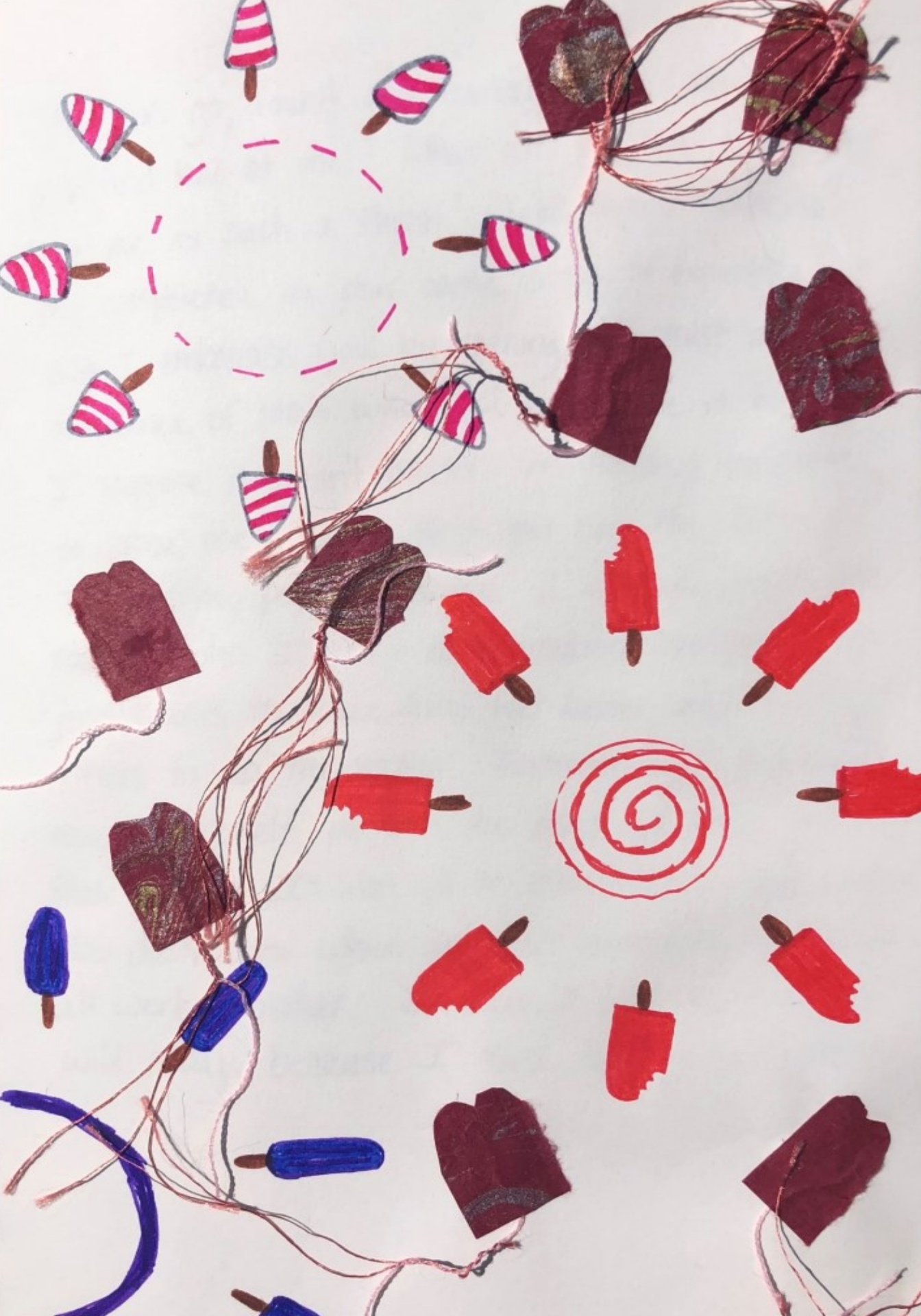


A Good Day

At our best, we are warm and comforting, to our patients, their families, to each other.
At our best, there is a flow to our work, our communications, to our tasks.

At our best, we move through our day together,
each connected and supported by the others.
At our best, we are calm despite whatever tides come our way. At our best,
we soothe. We heal. We make things better.

-a Physician



Here we go, round and round again. Why do you pick and tear at me? What was it that made you see me as such a threat? Was it my kindness? My expertise in your same areas? Did I embarrass you by earning the trust and confidence of a team that will not give it to you?

I suppose it doesn't matter. On the day you chose to erase me - me the first but not the only - I wore my popsicle dress. I wanted you to see me for who I am - a caretaker, someone who just wants to make kids feel better and to teach others to do the same. Someone who dedicated much of herself, perhaps too much at times, to these goals. It was all so unnecessary- you, bringing this destruction when we most critically needed to all work together. So now you will stay, and I will go, because I don't like going in circles.

-a Physician

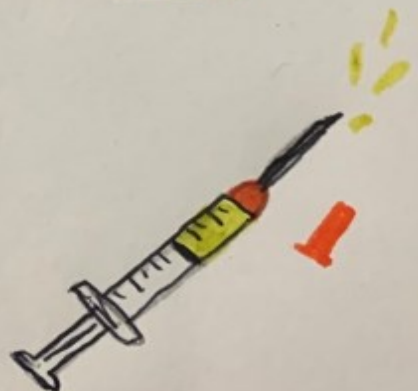
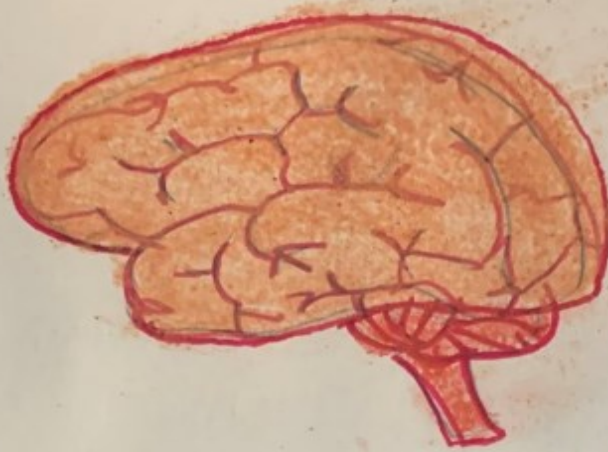


Behind the mask, tears are streaming down my face and my adrenaline is pumping harder than it has in my entire life. I can hear my own heartbeat, and the pounding in my ears is terrifying.

One of my coworkers starts counting down from 3, and I know that once we get to 1, we're releasing our grip on the door handle and entering our patient's room to put them into a supine hold. This step, while traumatic for both the patient and for staff, is necessary at this moment to maintain the safety of our patient and everyone else on our unit. Knowing that doesn't make it any easier. Once we get to 1, I have to face the reality that I may witness one or more of my coworkers getting hurt. I have to accept that I may no longer have control and could get hurt myself. I have to be the most aware and present I have ever been to ensure our patient remains safe. 3, 2, 1. I take a deep breath, and I step forward.

Behind the mask, I am a Behavioral Health Specialist working on a psychiatric unit during a global pandemic. Sometimes my job is rewarding beyond what I could ever imagine. Feeling the impact we have on our patients and witnessing the changes they can make is amazing. At the same time, I have left work countless times crying, dehydrated, bruised, bleeding, or covered in bodily fluids. I've continually surprised myself with my ability to step up to the plate, but being the holder of someone's else's pain and trauma is never easy and always weighs on you. Something I've taken away from our art group is that this is a shared sentiment among healthcare workers, yet we never back down. We continue to show up, day in and day out, for our patients and for our coworkers. We find ways to build resilience and we lean on each other. We step up to the plate in hard or scary situations, and that makes us brave. Throughout this group experience and my reflections on the past year of working in healthcare during a pandemic, I've been reminded that despite everything, hope and courage still persist.

-a Behavioral Health Specialist



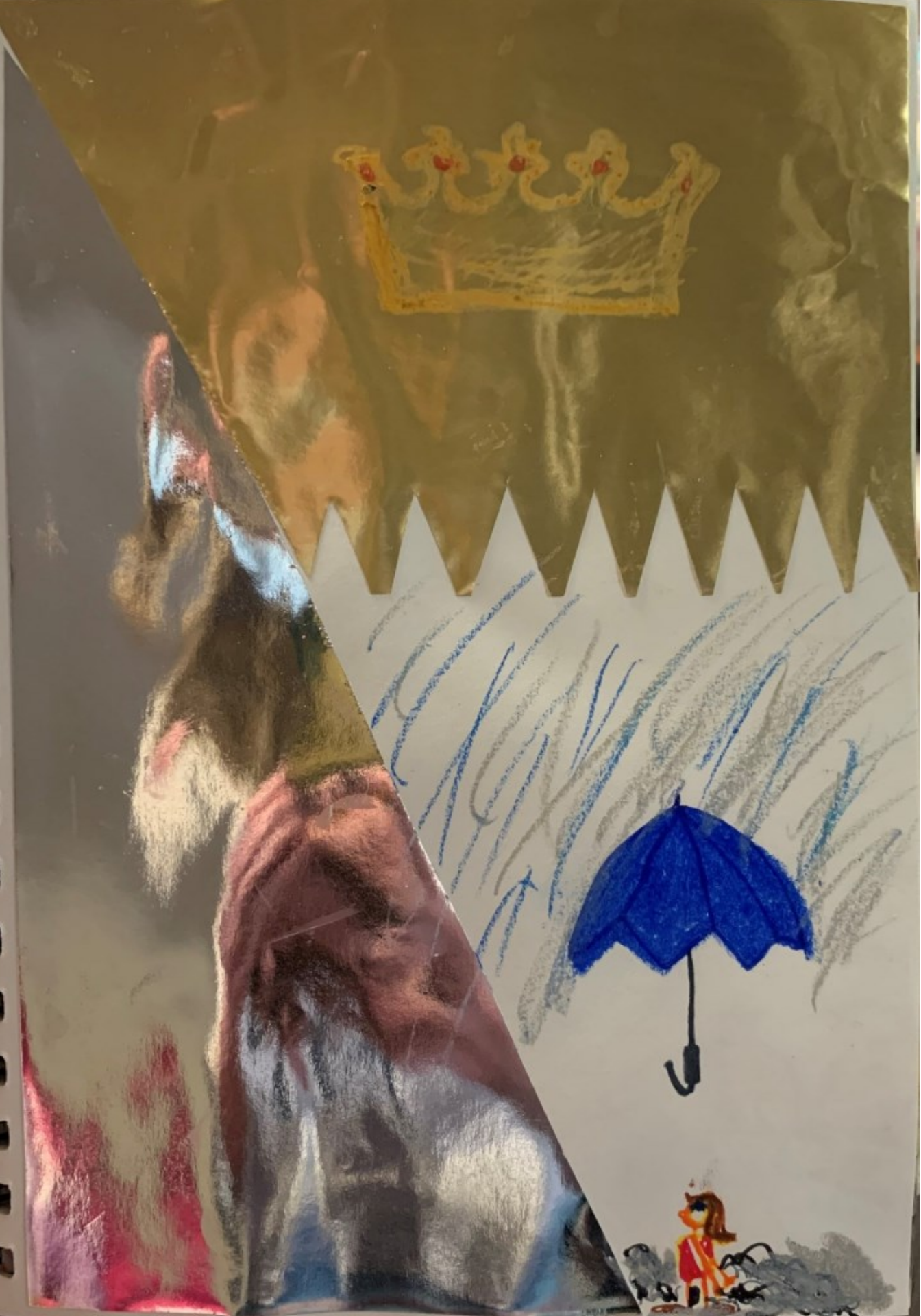


Knowledge is Power
Never By Yourself
Always Improving
Gentle & Kindness
Energizer Bunny
Positivity is Lucky



learning quickly, communication skills, and being an advocate. The job is busy and dynamic, but it also has an underlying flow to it. The work is stressful and strenuous, but it has deep-rooted purpose. You learn to ^{give} your very best efforts for your patients and their families, all while trying to keep afloat and hold onto your sanity. There's also a concept of self care and learning to be good to yourself when the times get rough. I really, nursing should be filled with passion and patience. The patients we care for are in their most vulnerable states, often times alone and confused. So, we as nurses do our best to comfort and offer realistic reassurance. We encourage our patients to have hope and to be involved in their care. When I went into nursing, my favorite part about it was that you get to be kind and empathetic with people. You get to actually comfort and help others (hopefully) feel better, even in the worst of circumstances. On a good day when everything is flowing

And you're feeling inspired, the work feels meaningful. You feel like you're going almost all day, but that you are learning, growing, and contributing to others well-being. You also get to drink all the caffeine you want and feel like the Energizer Bunny. I placed a card with a coffee cup and a heart design in the foam base to depict what the nursing profession means to me, because that's what I want it to be. Coffee for motivation and energy, and a heart for the emotional support I like to offer others. In addition to this, I would place a brain, syringe, Rx manual, and med-surg books because a strong nurse understands the indication for all medical interventions and the pathophysiology of disease. We are also gentle but very effective with needles and skills. Everything we do is calm and collected, and ideally with the patient's best interest in mind. We use our prior knowledge, but also learn a lot on the fly. We take care of ourselves so we





When I got into nursing, I just knew I wanted to help people. I had no idea the trauma and burn out my coworkers and I would go through. I thought illness and patient death would be the worst of it. Limited resources and lack of support from the “higher ups” would lead to the socially accepted weekly mental breakdowns on our unit.

Therapy and medications (including a healthy dose of dark nursing humor) were important in coping with these bedside nursing horrors. However, I was delighted to realize the impact of shared experiences with coworkers and fellow healthcare professionals (even if those experiences didn’t look remotely like the chipper photos of the nurses on the homepage of our intranets).

-a Nurse



I wish I could easily sum up what being a nurse during a pandemic means, but I will try. It is the way you hold someone's hand to help them die from a terrible virus that is traumatic for everyone involved. It is the way you gown, glove, mask, and google before going into every patient's room, hoping you don't catch the virus. It is the way you take the best care of your patients you can and they still end up in the ICU. It is the way you cry and sob on your way home from work, sad for so many people suffering and struggling to breathe.

I did not sign up to work on the Covid-19 floor. I had just come back from maternity leave and our unit was closed due to lack of surgeries. We were moved to a new unit of patients we had never taken care of before, a virus we had never seen. The whole staff was learning about the virus as the patient population increased in numbers. More and more patients admitted with little to no knowledge of the best way to treat the virus. It was terrifying coming home each night to my new baby, hoping I wouldn't catch or bring the virus home. I was there for it all.

I am a nurse and I am happy I was able to hold the hands of so many patients that died. I am happy I helped my fellow nurses with constant critical situations that required an experienced nurse. I have now transitioned to an acute rehab floor to help patients in their next step of healing. I don't want anyone to have to go through this, but I'm happy I was there for the people who needed me. Nursing is climbing the mountain of struggles to see the sunrise over the summit.

A med/surg/rehab nurse

**The creators of this book
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