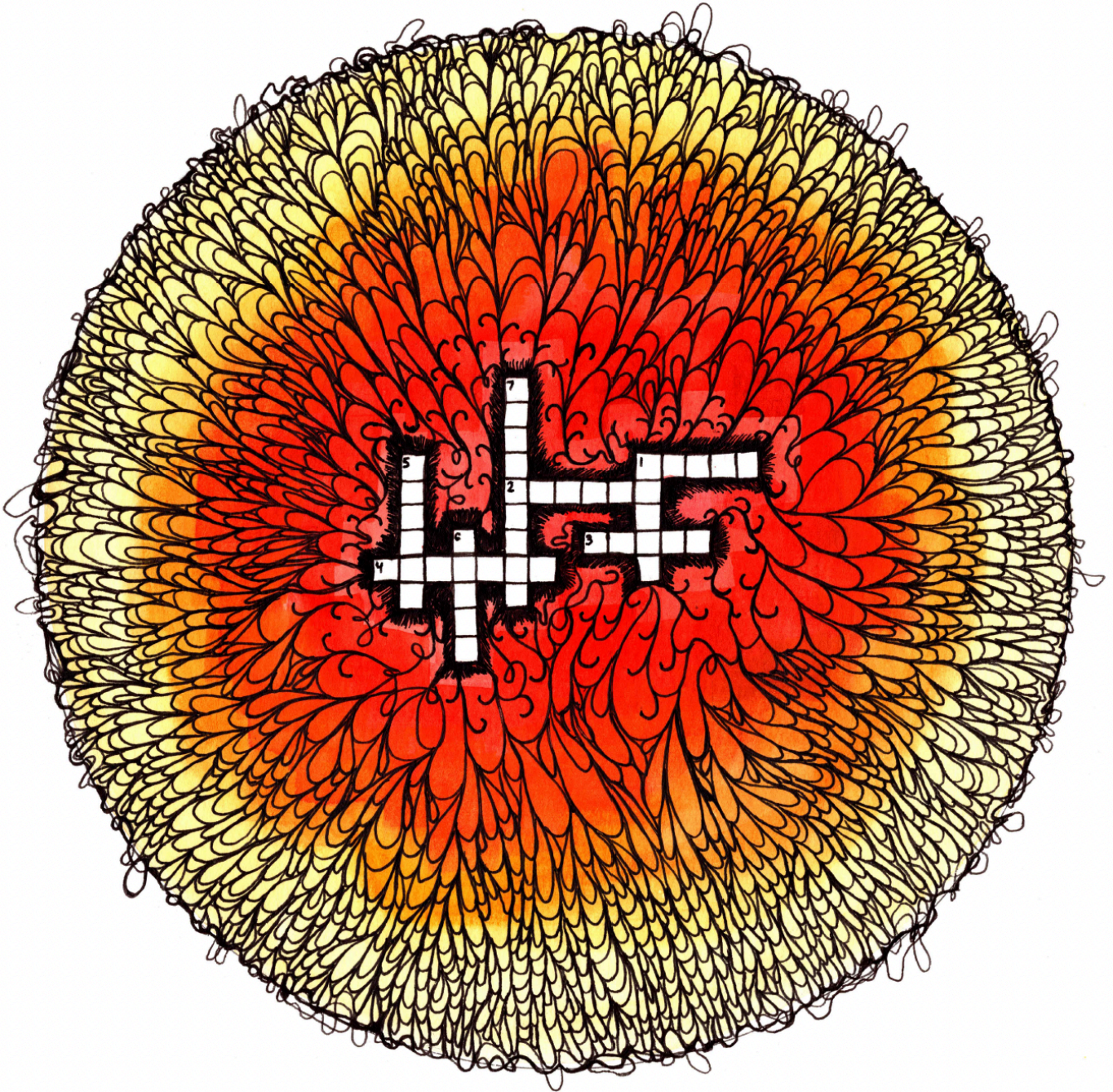


Sunflower



Across

1. What might be at the end of a tunnel?

As a medical speech therapist I interact with hundreds of people and their closest family members and friends who are in the midst of some of the darkest moments of their lives. What an honor it is to be a vehicle to promote light, comfort, and hope as their ability to speak, think, and swallow steadily improves. Nothing in life seems as sweet as feeling sunbeams warm your skin and progress feed your heart.

2. One-of-a-kind

One of the things I appreciate most about my line of work is the extreme specificity. My education is designed to provide me with a unique skill set redolent of purpose. I have, and will always value this level of distinction when it comes to what I have learned both through my schooling and through my clinical experience. Each person I see at work has individualized needs and wants, both before and after whatever medical event brought them to the hospital. Specific preparation meets specific necessities.

3. You can't do this for 2 masters

To serve is to love.

4. Embark (2 words)

I made a man cry once: a middle-aged man who had a family to support and who was dealt a rough hand when he had a stroke that left his brain with impairments in attention span, short-term memory, problem-solving, etc. The tears were a result of challenging his brain every day to improve, to reach higher and achieve more—to overcome this. By the end of working with him he broke down crying out of gratitude for being able to leave the facility ready to return home and resume his responsibilities.

We each live different lives and have different chapters that comprise our unique storylines. We all must say goodbye to previous versions of ourselves that are dead and gone. Rebirths occur in each of us. Some of them feel quite gradual while others come upon us in a mere instant, a mere heartbeat. Our individual journeys are composed of these ghosts of ourselves, layers that make each of us who we are. Sometimes we allow others to see these effigies and we allow them to soar in the skies cherishing what once was, understanding that those versions are still a part of us somehow. Sometimes we let them wax old and allow a film of dust and cobwebs to accumulate, allowing them to decay alone in the dark, never to be seen again. Regardless of how we cope, we all must continue along our storylines. There is only one way to go forth, and that is onwards.

Down

1. *Grasp*

No matter how much I think I know, there is always more to learn. I meet patients every day that challenge the way I see the world, with circumstances that invite me to increase my understanding of a certain disease or condition, and in most cases, a certain perspective. Depending on how you look at it, every moment is an opportunity for greater understanding of yourself, others, and the gorgeous world around you.

5. *A lighthouse in a storm*

There are life-altering moments. These are seconds and inches and heartbeats that actually do end up mattering—ones that you probably never thought would. Everyone who experiences these moments must come face to face with the inherent consequences attributed to these seemingly insignificant measurements of time and space. Whether by choice or fate, at the end of the day one must confront and come to terms with their personal realities, no matter how uncomfortable or unwanted they might be.

Sometimes I feel like one of the only things maintaining anyone's level of homeostasis is the concept of hope. It is the great motivator. Beacons have a way of arising in the midst of extreme darkness, trial and tribulation, and the abyss of sorrow. They come in many forms: in human form, in repentance, in a change of scenery, in faith, in the cry of a newborn, in letting go, in death. As unique as everyone is, we all have our own rays of light guiding us home and to hopeful safety.

6. *"He's Got the Whole _____ in His Hands"*

Tears began to well in my eyes as both of her sisters began crying over hearing her speak some of her first words following the accident. Her sister sat in Mexico on her birthday and was able to hear the word "ti" uttered by her recently non-verbal sister.

Numerous scars covered the right side of her face and skull, with redness and obvious swelling distorting her face. These massive lesions served as daily reminders of a day when this woman's life dramatically changed. The mirror would forevermore remind her of that day. It was a day in space and time that would shift her from a vibrant, life-loving woman into someone seemingly unrecognizable: nearly mute, unable to feed or dress herself, unable to walk without assistance. We four sat in silence and watched a video of her just a month prior where this same woman was dancing and singing and leading a mariachi band. As she and her sisters and I sat watching this treasured video, we all began to tear up again at what once was. The changed woman sitting in front of me recognized a version of herself that was so out of reach, forever morphed into her new, current being.

“Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, y diez.”

Another moment of tears came rushing from her sisters as I was able to help this sweet woman verbally produce this seemingly simple sequence. The patient’s sisters were crying and hugging her sweet sister and whispering, “te amo” in her ear over and over. Beyond her son’s name, these were some of the only words she had uttered since the car accident.

7. A sense of belonging

Most of our therapy sessions involved re-learning correct hand movements; things like object use or counting, pointing to objects, making appropriate gestures. I had the privilege of holding and gently orchestrating this tender woman’s hand in an attempt to restore function. We worked on answering the phone and bringing it to her ear, using chapstick, using a brush—using common objects for their intended purposes. The only form of communication she had was a simple head nod and an occasional shake to indicate “no”.

This is not a common route I take in therapy sessions. It is a rarity when I interact with someone who has had a stroke so profound that there is essentially no communication left. Unable to volitionally phonate—the only times were when she spontaneously coughed, laughed, or cried. I saw her do them all.

This beautiful Vietnamese woman with high cheekbones and beautiful milky skin, a simple braid down her back, and gentle, black, confused eyes, almost always had a smile on her face. She was always surrounded by family. Amidst such a momentous shift in her life, those she was special to and who were special to her buoyed her up in her greatest time of need. What an honor to be in the presence of such familial love, comfort and true community.

*Across: 1. Light 2. Unique 3. Serve 4. Go forth
Down: 1. Learn 5. Beacon 6. World 7. Community*