I recently had “a win” at work and, thankfully, the patient I was caring for did too. The day was as full of surprises; I went in to work intending to provide direct patient care, but found that there were fewer patients than usual on the unit, and was given administrative time instead. Midway through the shift, a nurse entered my office and tearfully asked, “Can you take my patients and approve a schedule swap for me for tomorrow? My mom is sick.” I agreed and picked up her patients. I looked forward to those four hours. In her report, my colleague described her four patients as “jolly,” “enjoying her day,” “very pleasant,” and “the best,” respectively. How often do we use those words in patient reports? I was set up for a win.

I met the first patient, “jolly,” and, noting his accent, asked where he was from. That flowed into a talk about our shared hometown. I met the second patient, “enjoying her day,” who had been with us for a while and I could tell that what she needed was a visit with her family and little from me. I complimented her daughter’s artwork, did my assessment, and left the room. I spoke to the third patient, “very pleasant” (who was five days removed from acute myelogenous leukemia diagnosis), about the signs and symptoms of this disease, and arsenic he had taken at home, and his weeks of all-trans retinoic acid (ATRA) and arsenic. I showed him the cracks in all his nails (and I thanked him because we never see the long-term effects of arsenic in an inpatient setting). We even talked about the translocation of chromosomes 5 and 18. He was happy to share some things about APL and treatment side effects I didn’t know, and I was eager to talk about blood counts and some stories about the lives of survivors I was blessed to know.

Then the conversation changed. “How do you know when you’ve had a win?” he asked. Again, I wasn’t sure I understood.

“As a nurse, I mean,” he said. “I think about this a lot when I’m here. In my world, it’s easy. I look at a scoreboard and I know when I’ve had a win. How do you, as a nurse, know when you’ve had a win?”

I took a breath and the answers came fast. “When I teach someone something new, when I come into a mess and I leave and a patient is tidy and comfortable and fed, when I help a team member, when . . . .”

He pressed on. “But c’mon, you start out in the negative around here, do people leave their work day thinking they’ve had a win?”

“The negative, Coach?” I asked, again slightly confused.

“Cancer, you know, it’s like a cloud. You walk onto this floor at the start of your shift and there’s cancer all around you—pain, suffering; you come in at zero and boom, in the negative. You mean people leave here winning?”

“Yes,” I replied with certainty. “Yes. Sometimes when I wear my manager hat,” I said, “I have to help people see the