

# Integrating the Arts into Medical Education

## Facing Dissection 2008-2009

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*It is our responsibility to remember that medicine is not only a science, but also the art of letting our own individuality interact with the individuality of the patient.*

-A. Schweitzer, 1968

*I pray that medical students will never allow their knowledge to get into the way of their relationship with their patients. I will pray that all the technological marvels at their command will not prevent them from practicing medicine out of a little black bag if they are to. I pray that when they go into a patient's room they will recognize that the main distance is not from the door to the bed but from the patient's eyes to their own, and that the shortest distance between those two is a horizontal straight line—the kind of straight line that means most when the physician bends low to the patient's loneliness, fear, pain, and the overwhelming sense of mortality that comes flooding up out of the unknown, and when the physician's hand on the patient's shoulder or arm is a shelter against the darkness. Even as medical students attach the highest value to their science, they should never forget that it works best when combined with their art, and that their art is what is most enduring in their profession. Ultimately, it is the physician's respect for the human soul that determines the worth of his science.*

-Norman Cousins, *The Healing Heart*, NY: Avon, 1983

Dissection of the human body often raises questions about the source of cadavers, invasion of privacy, and human mortality. We encourage you to explore attitudes towards dissection and death as you experience the first year of medical school in the belief that facing and expressing aversions, fears, and fantasies associated with human dissection can help prepare you, not only for academic work in the anatomy laboratory, but also for the emotional work that patient care—the "laying on of hands"—implies. Our aim is to help you develop a foundation for continuing personal self-inquiry and exploration of humanistic, ethical, and existential issues in medicine and in life.

The first year course consists of the following four experiences:

1. **Facing Dissection: Course Overview:** Introduction to themes and timeline of the course, the history of dissection, the anatomical gift and the parallels between dissection and patient care. (Day 1)
2. **Meeting the Cadavers:** Tour of dissection laboratory in small groups. (Day 1)
3. **Facing Dissection: Coping Styles:** Exploration of the experience of dissection through presentation and analysis of images and writings about dissection from a variety of sources including UMASS medical students. (Usually just before head and neck dissection)
4. **Memorial Service:** Student designed service of commemoration. (End of course)

Coordinator of Anatomical Gifts  
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Dear Sir:

I expect to give my body to whichever school can best use it and have made out anatomical gift forms to that effect. I have a profound sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in this. It occurred to me that perhaps this statement might be useful to teachers of anatomy classes as they introduce medical and dental students and nurses, etc. to cadavers. With this modest (!) thought, I decided to send you a copy now rather than sending it only with my corpse. Please feel free to use it or discard it. In any event, it expresses my present feelings (age 58) on a subject of importance to me and I want to share them with you.

Sincerely,

*Clair Small*

**Anatomical Gift  
To A Medical Student**

This is my body.  
The shell of my being  
Which is given to you.

In final offering  
To the world  
I share the elements of life.  
From these old bones,  
These ligaments,  
My sinews and my nerves  
May that life force  
That ran in me  
Shine forth once more  
And pass to you  
The knowledge and the power  
That help sustain  
The miracle of life.

## One Breath Apart

You came to take me for a walk with you.  
 I was afraid at first  
     To meet you  
     To take your hand.  
 I pretended you were here  
     To teach me the details-  
     Muscles, arteries, nerves-  
 And I held on tight.

Then I saw your face,  
     And I knew  
 You came to take me for a walk with you-  
     On the edge  
 You on one side,  
     Me on the other  
 We are one breath apart.

--Nancy Long, U Mass Medical School 1998

## Bibliography: A Selected Start

### On Dissection....

*Doctors are whippersnappers in ironed white coats  
 Who spy up your rectums and look down your throats  
 And press you and poke you with sterilized tools  
 And stab at solutions that pacify fools.  
 I used to revere them and do what they said  
 Till I learned what they learned on was already dead. Gilda Radner*

Marks, SC., et al. (1997). "Human Anatomy: A Foundation for Education About Death and Dying in Medicine," *Clin. Anat* 10:118-122. Dissection experiences in two programs illustrate how death education begun early in the medical curriculum can contribute to the development of practitioners sensitive to the broader issues of human mortality.

Platt, M., (1975). "Looking at the Body," (*Hastings Center Reports*. 5)  
 Feelings aroused by being alone with a dead body, various kinds of looking (including overlooking), and professional similarities between anatomist and painter are articulately discussed. See also Carter, AH., (1997) *First Cut: A Season in the Human Anatomy Lab*. NY:Picador.

Sharkey, F., (1982). "Ingmar Wollenstrum," (*A Parting Gift*. chapter 2. NY: St Martin's Press)  
 Pediatrician traces the development of emotional detachment as her sole coping mechanism for handling the death of patients to her dissection experiences. Entire book is worthwhile.

Stone, I., (1961). "The Flight," (*The Agony and the Ecstasy*. chapter 4. NY: Doubleday)  
 Michelangelo's "sacrilegious errand"—performing human dissections to gain the precious knowledge he needs as an apprentice sculptor—raises concerns similar to those voiced by medical students. Emotions of terror, revulsion, pity, contamination, and personal vulnerability are confronted and ultimately replaced by fascination, excitement, and joy as he loses himself in the details of the experience.

### **Additional Resources and References for Today's Webinar**

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