

# *Poetry for Physicians: How Literature Can Improve Your Doctoring*

Johanna Shapiro, Ph.D.

Department of Family Medicine,  
Director, Program in Medical  
Humanities & Arts  
UC Irvine School of Medicine  
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- Van Gogh

# Objectives

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- Understand how literature can be used as a tool for professional development
- Describe how studying literature can increase physician empathy for patients' ( and physicians') experience
- Demonstrate how literature can help us think differently and more creatively about patients
- Understand how exposure to literature can reduce physician frustration and burn-out

# ***What are Medical Humanities & Arts?***

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- **A field of scholarship and academic study**
- **The incorporation of humanities-and arts-based teaching into medical school and residency curricula:**
  - **Literature**
  - **Narrative ethics**
  - **Visual and performing arts**
  - **History of medicine**
  - **Philosophy of medicine**

# Why Turn to the Humanities?

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*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?*

*Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*

*- T.S. Eliot*

# *Old Jewish Proverb*

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## ■ *Question:*

– What is truer than the truth?

## ■ *Answer:*

– A good story

# A Good Story...

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- Reminds us to listen to the authentic voice and experience of the patient
- Helps us see familiar experiences in new and creative ways
- Encourages us to examine our fundamental values and highest aspirations
- Helps us counteract cynicism and despair by rediscovering awe and wonder



*Patients are able to authentically disclose what their illness experiences are like*

The voice of medicine stands in contrast to the voice of the lifeworld...

- Elliot Mishler

- Pablo Picasso

# The Kingdom of the Sick

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Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place

– Susan Sontag



# *Chemotherapy*

- Aimee Grunberger

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sorry can't leave just yet  
two kids so little  
still cry when they stub a toe  
need help sticking bandaid  
can't go right now  
got a class reunion  
book on reserve  
four tickets to Vancouver no refunds

reading up on survivors  
card-playing grandma number on her arm  
ten-car pile-up wheelchair for life  
hopeless coma awoke one morning  
bone-cracking tumor size of the sun

Couldn't help it  
teacher made me  
said to lay my head on the desk  
but everyone else can leave  
heavy door slams  
not so fast lady

I'll tell you why  
for nothing that's why  
for the hell of it  
some number came up  
so what you gonna do huh  
just plain spiteful

put my affairs in order  
ten notarized final wishes  
now my bald skull  
lonely breast broken heart  
hunch over the muddy curb  
in the filthy wind  
no place in particular  
wait for light to change

# Enlarging our Perspective

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- Medical education teaches what the point is and how to stick to it
- Sticking to our point may mean missing the patient's point
- Literature reminds us we can learn a lot by not being so quick to judge what belongs and what doesn't belong in the patient's story

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*You can miss a lot*

*by sticking to the point*

*- Hmong saying*

# Walking the Dog

– *John Wright, M.D.*

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She weighed  
Three hundred pounds.  
Fat and high sugars  
were killing her  
I thought.

So,  
I thought.  
So,

I gave her a puppy  
with dark curly hair,  
nothing else  
had worked

Walking the dog  
twice a day  
I thought  
might persuade,  
might motivate.

She was pleased  
with my prescription  
she laughed,  
she rocked  
from side to side.

She lived  
for twelve years  
hugging  
that little black dog  
While her lean husband  
walked it faithfully,  
twice a day.



Edvard Munch

SCIENCE CAN ONLY  
ASCERTAIN WHAT *IS*,  
BUT NOT  
WHAT *SHOULD BE*

- Albert Einstein

# Paying Attention to Values

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- Doctors need help figuring out “what should be”
  - In their patients’ lives and deaths
  - In their own lives
- Literature can help us explore conflicting or competing values in ways that engage the emotions as well as the intellect



# I Stepped Past Your Room Today

- Gerry Greenstone, M.D.

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I stepped past your room today  
Rushed to a cramped office  
Rather than endure  
The eerie calm of Palliative Care  
It's been three days now  
Since I visited you  
And that's not good.

I was there from the beginning  
When we split your belly  
To find cancer  
Erupting everywhere  
The liver's glistening surface  
Ridged and spotted as the moon.

Then came the radiation  
Malignant clusters beamed with cobalt  
Bombarded with pions  
In a cellular explosion.  
And chemotherapy  
Specialized molecules  
To invade you like tissue  
And work their complex chemistry.

But in the end  
Our white-coated arsenal  
Was powerless  
Against the long trajectory  
Of disease.

Now you lie there  
Shriveled husk of a man  
So pale and trembling  
With barely enough weight  
To press against the sheets.

In the harsh glare  
of those white sheets  
I see the impotence  
Of myself as a physician  
Whose energy is aimed  
At cure and renewal.  
Can you understand  
What it means to face you  
Like this,  
Your courage against my fear?

Let me not lose sight  
Of what you once were  
And still are  
A man and a father  
Who did the things fathers do

Watched your daughter at ballet  
Her leaps and pirouettes  
Cheered your son at his soccer games  
Stood shivering in the rain.

To respect your humanity  
To preserve your dignity  
Because if I can hold you clear enough  
There's nothing more to fear.

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I have always seen medicine as a spiritual path, a way of life that is characterized by harmlessness, compassion, generosity, service, a kind of an awe or reverence for life, a sense of mystery.

- Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.

# Reminding Us of Awe and Mystery

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- The meaning of medicine isn't science.
- The meaning of life isn't science either.
- Science defines life in its own way, but life is larger than science.
- This takes nothing away from science, but allows us to enlarge and expand on what science can tell us

# Twisted Smile from *Mortal Lessons*

Richard Selzer, M.D.

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I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth has been severed. She will be thus from now on.

The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily?

The young woman speaks. "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.

# What Skills Can the Humanities Help Physicians Develop?

- Close attention, careful observation, active listening
- Empathy for multiple perspectives
- Emotional connectivity and engagement
- Whole person understanding
- Reflection on experience and its meaning
- Creative imagination and curiosity
- Awareness of one's own psychological and emotional processes
- Willingness to share a small measure of the patient's suffering
- Renewal of meaning in the practice of medicine

