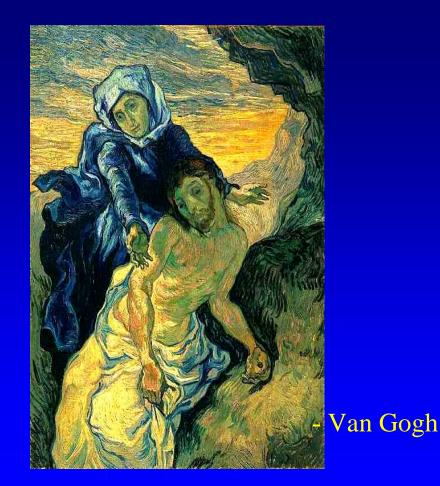
#### Poetry for Physicians: How Literature Can Improve Your Doctoring

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# **Objectives**

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?

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?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

- T.S. Eliot

#### Old Jewish Proverb

Question:

 What is truer than the truth?

 Answer:

 Agood story

# A Good Story...

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

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

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

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

#### You can miss a lot

## by sticking to the point

- Hmong saying

## Walking the Dog – John Wright, M.D.

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 /S, BUT NOT WHAT SHOULD BE

- Albert Einstein

# Paying Attention to Values

- 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

#### J Stepped Past Your Room Today - Gerry Greenstone, M.D.

I stepped past your room today Rushed to a crammed 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. 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

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.

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

