

Medical Student Reflective Writing: What Can We Learn?

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I will tell you something about stories. They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death. You don't have anything if you don't have stories.

- Leslie Marmon Silko,
Ceremonies

Thoughts on George Harrison's Death

Jena Berg, MSIII

Mid-lecture the ENT surgeon pointed to a slide.

It was half-head, half-recognizable.

I'd say disfigured but that implies some figured starting place

Half serious he said, "Most people who get head and neck cancer sort of get what they deserve."

Hardened by many heads, he was ready to take on the next terminal case with a swagger.

His bravado implied: this unfortunate head hadn't led the clean life of a surgeon.

I imagine perhaps it had once crossed his path in the pre-dawn hour:

the surgeon with clean trimmed nails en route to work,
the head staggering home
from bars and smoky trysts.

Or maybe it had sat at home,
up all night, learning the sitar.

Overview

- What is reflective writing?
- Why do medical students write?
- What do medical students write about?
- What happens when students write?
- What are the dangers involved in medical student writing?
- What can we learn from medical student writing?

Reflective Writing

- Review and interpretation of experiences to
 - achieve deeper meaning/ understanding
 - guide future behavior
- Develops critical thinking, analysis
- Helps organize, make sense of morally ambiguous, complex situations
- Engages in meaning-making of experience
- Addresses emotions of self/other
- Can have either transformative or confirmatory outcomes



Why is writing important to you?

Through my patients' stories, I
learn how and why people suffer,
and why they heal

- Harriet Squier, M.D., internist,
professor, Michigan State University

The patient's story will come to
you, Like hunger, like thirst.

- John Stone, M.D.,
cardiologist, poet, professor of medicine,
Emory University School of Medicine

*When I'm having trouble with a patient,
when I feel I'm not doing the right
thing, I write a story from the patient's
point of view*

*- Rita Charon, M.D., Ph.D., internist, professor,
Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons*

*Everything about being human is in
poetry... I wonder then whether poetry
is not therapeutic.*

*- Rafael Campo, M.D., internist, Harvard
University School of Medicine*

Why Do Students Write?

- To make sense of their experience
- To find an outlet for confusing, distressing emotions
- To memorialize a powerful encounter
- To reconnect with the humanity of their patients
- To make something beautiful or meaningful from traumatic, ugly events

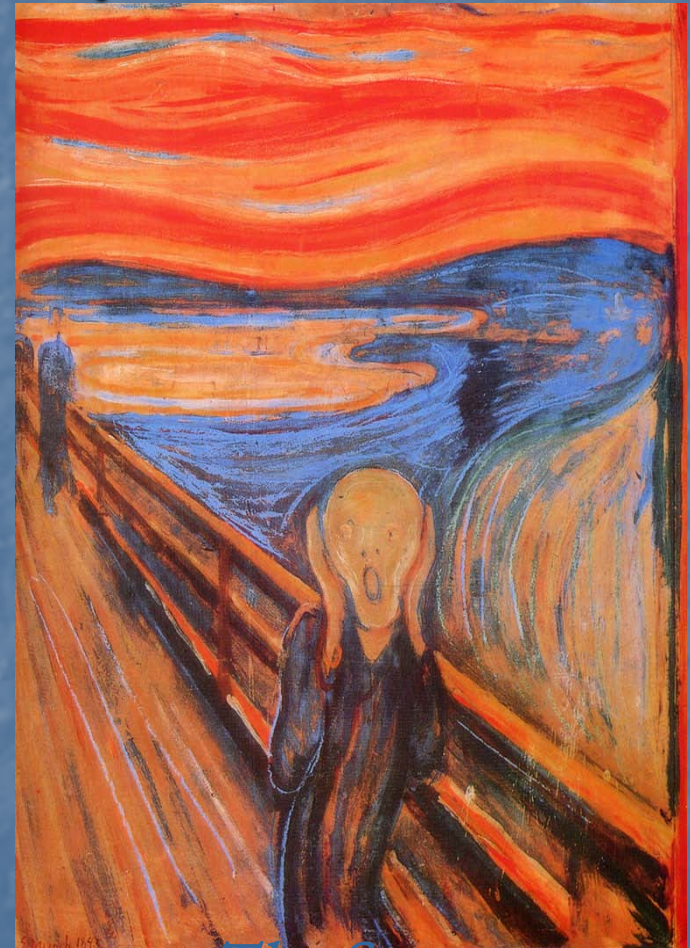
Narrative Typologies - What Stories Do Students Want to Tell?

- Chaos
- Restitution
- Witnessing/
Resistance
- Journey/
Transformation



Chaos Story

- General characteristics
 - Pre-narrative; anti-narrative
 - Pile-up of calamities
 - Isolation and alienation
 - Frightening to both narrator and listener



The Scream
Edvard Munch

Restitution Story



General characteristics

- * Find-it and fix-it
- * Person restored to healthy, pre-trauma state
- * Reassuring, happy outcome



Witnessing/Resistance Story

- General characteristics
 - Offers testimony to difficult truths not generally recognized or acknowledged
 - Challenges conventional wisdom
 - Commits to standing with the suffering other



Journey Story

Reluctant hero(ine)...



A crisis or calamity!



Journey Continues...



*Assisted by
friends...*

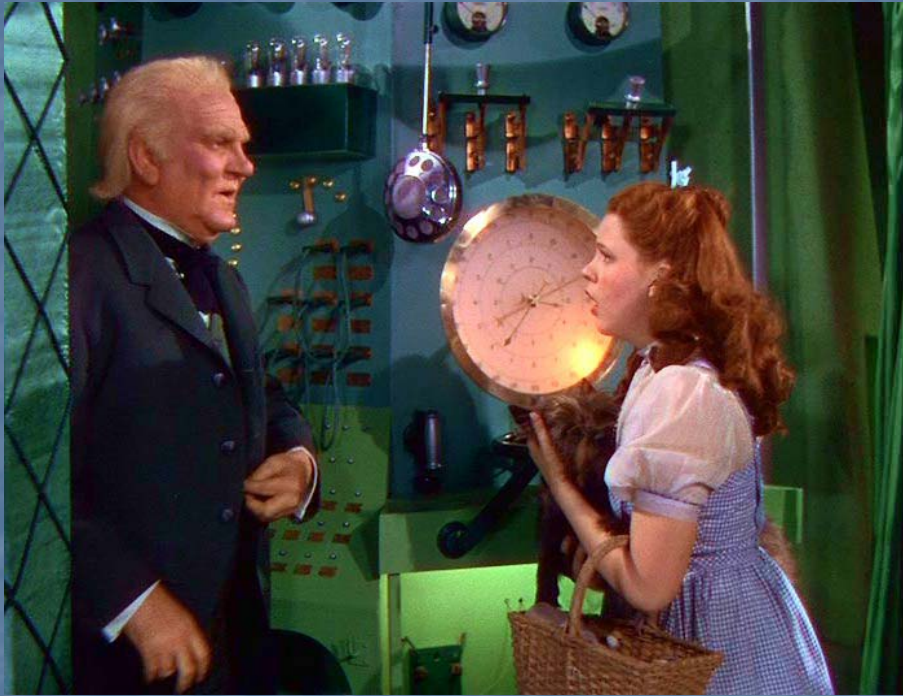


*Threatened by
evil demons
and monsters*



...and guides

Journey Ends:



Learns important lessons



*Returns home to apply learning
for the benefit of others*

Journey Story

A thousand healthy spirits * Leila Sabet

i allow you to make me feel
unworthy
i allow that
giving you permission
with my silent mediocre frame
while exploding inside
someday will explode outside

So i exhale and breathe the
darkness out of my mind
and inhale all sorts of sweet
head rush
and euphoric sense of oxygen
saturation

I pause

stand reflecting
on the moments of hurry
heated night flurry
of brownian bodies in sway-like
coordination
Oneness
centered up this cilia-filled breath
flow of go no
go into crimson thoughts
Robots with spirit
move about in artistic science
or scientific art
depend on brain but cling to heart
to move the crimson ideas in rhythm
with waves of rhythm
circadian style

up in the night
Which lives full of forsaken beds
Because of my euphoria
i can feel euphoric even
thinking about
the blood saturation in the shirt
of GSW
the vomit saturation of the
gown in tylenol OD
the urine saturation of sheets in
seizure #3
i can feel euphoric with
thoughts of handcuffed jailed
schizophrenic voices inside his head
telling him to cut his arm
to constantly harm himself
I can feel euphoric with thoughts of
suture closing skin
and peroxide lysing cells

to wipe away the blood from
stabbed drunk and
looking at me kind of funny
kind of scary
i wipe away blood spilling hate
wipe clean slate
with one act of washed feet
wipe away her crown of tears
with one kind motion of sincerely
nurturing devotion
And exhaled is the darkness
of a hopeless life
in one great sob
Inhaled is the dream of a
thousand healthy spirits
marching in unison

What Happens When Students Write?

- **Stage I - Writing**
 - Confront vulnerability - no right answers
 - Necessity of reflection - not mere chronology
 - Engage creativity and imagination
 - Find personal voice
 - Emotions
 - Values

What Happens When Students Write?

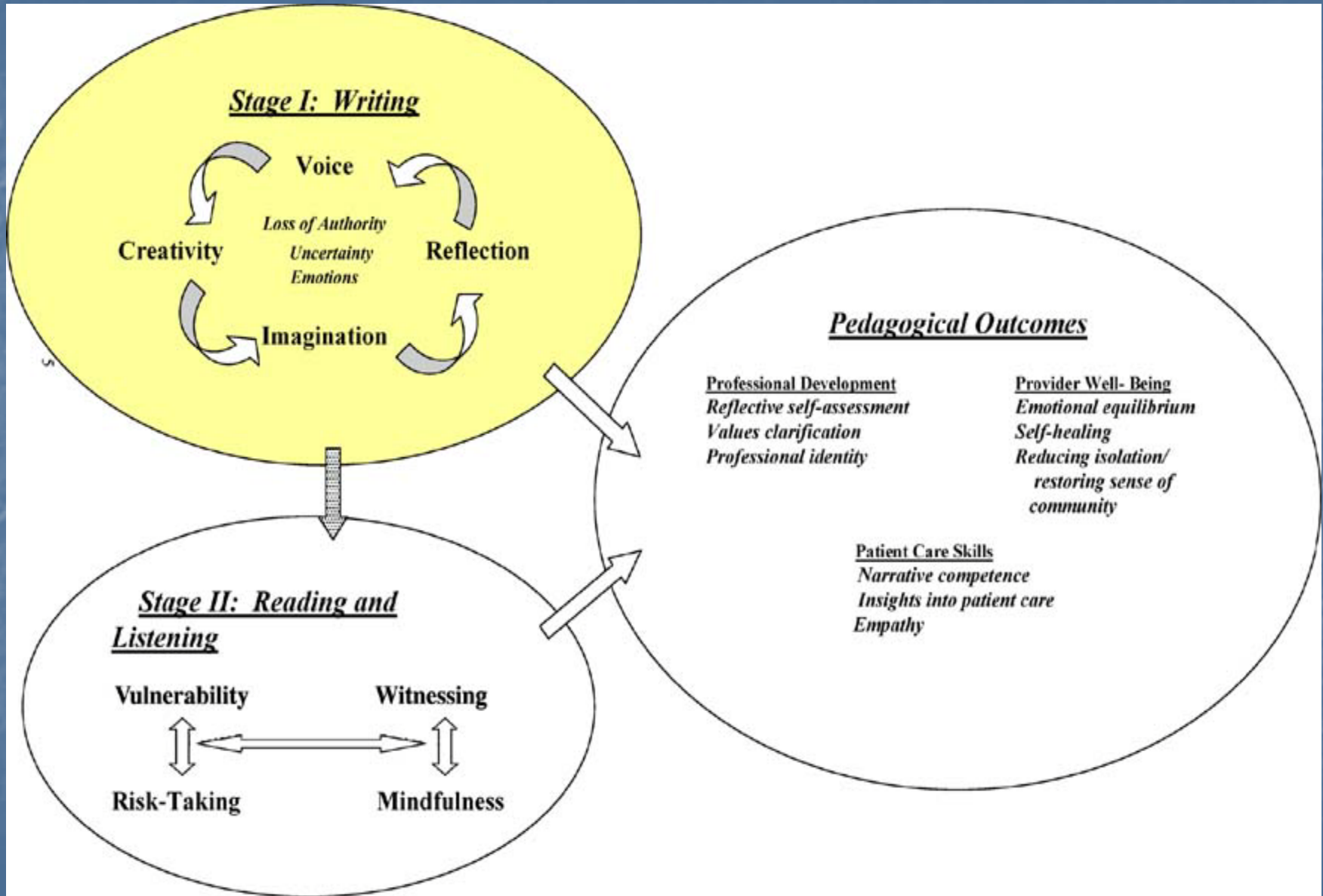
- **Stage II - Sharing and Discussing**
 - Vulnerability /risk-taking
 - disclosing of self to others for improved wellbeing (patient analogy)
 - Witnessing/being fully present
 - as presenter and as audience
 - Developing additional insights, understanding - growth/transformation
 - Synergy between writer and listeners

What Happens When Students Write?

- **Stage III - Pedagogical Outcomes**
- Professional development
 - Reflective self-assessment, greater self-understanding
 - Values clarification
 - Professional identity
- Professional/personal wellbeing
 - Building community - increased trust, teamwork, problem-solving
 - Greater familiarity with, insight into emotional dimension of medicine
 - Offsets burn-out, moral distress

What Happens When Students Write?

- Stage III - Pedagogical Outcomes
- Patient care skills
 - Narrative competence (increased sensitivity to story)
 - Insights into patient behavior, dr/pt dynamics
 - Empathy for patient/family perspectives
 - New ideas about action (enacting alternatives)



Narrative Accountability

- Reflective writing has power to dilute or distort traditional goals of written medical communication
 - improved patient care
 - enhanced learning
- Must move beyond HIPAA
- Meaningful confidentiality protections for both patient and student-physician

Narrative Accountability

- What are the goals of writing?
 - Self-understanding vs. self-aggrandizement
 - New learning vs. self-justification
- How would patient feel reading description?
 - Empathic vs. unfair portrayal
 - Respectful vs. disrespectful presentation
- How do we prepare students for emotions/insights unleashed through reflective writing process?
- What are the limitations when a story co-constructed by two people (or more) is told by only one?
- What are the societal, cultural, socioeconomic issues that may not be visible in the story?

What We Can Learn from Student Writing

- **Insight:** Glimpse into students' inner world
 - What is their educational experience like?
 - What distresses them? Confuses them? Inspires them?
- **Awareness:** What kinds of stories do students tell?
 - ObGyn study - majority restitution stories
 - Poetry analysis - majority witnessing/resistance

What We Can Learn from Student Writing?

- **Action - translation of insight in practice**
 - What do we need to change?
 - How can we better support our learners?
 - Better address distress, demoralization, isolation, burn-out
 - Pay attention to emotions in medical training
 - Encourage students to tell all kinds of stories

