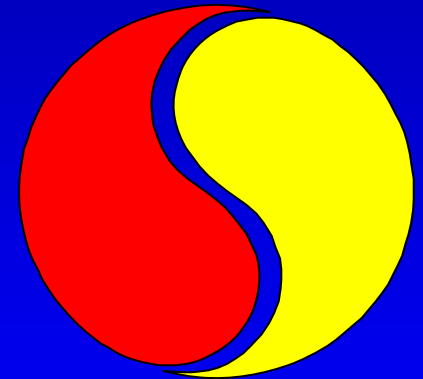


# “Take Two Poems and Call Me in the Morning”: Poetic Remedies to Soothe Physician Stress and Burnout



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August 7, 2005



# *What are Similarities between Doctors and Poets?*

- Confront mortality and death
- Create order from chaos
- Relief of suffering
- Concern with healing
- Combine emotional distance (steadiness) with emotional engagement (tenderness)



# How is a Patient Like a Poem?

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- Should make us feel something, as well as cognitively apprehend them
- Are sometimes allusive, indirect, mysterious rather than straightforward and accessible
- Pack complexity and multiple meanings into a small space
- Require careful, empathic attention to truly understand

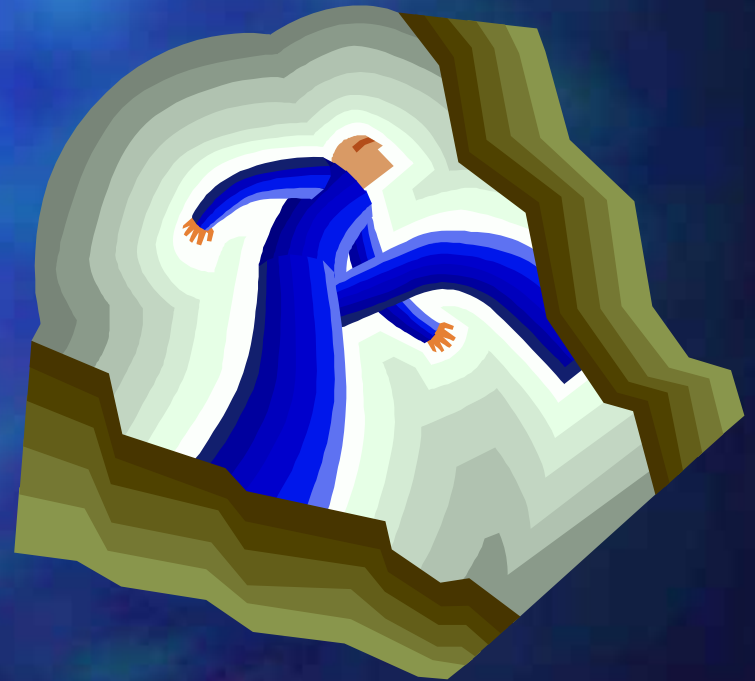
# Physician Stress and Burn-Out

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- At some point in our careers, we long to pause, to reflect, and reevaluate
- What used to invigorate is now quotidian and uninteresting
- Our work, and perhaps our lives as well, lose luster and meaning

# Burn-out?

- Emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization
- Lowered sense of accomplishment
- Chronic irritability, negativity, and pessimism



# The Inferno

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- In the words of the medieval poet, Dante Alighieri:

*Midway in the journey of our life  
I came to myself in a dark wood  
For the straight way was lost*







# How Can Poetry Help?

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- There are many strategies to address stress and burn-out
  - Stress management and relaxation techniques
  - Efficiency restructuring
  - Cognitive reframing
  - Communication skills

# Poetry might help as well... but how?

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- Poetry can't find a cure for diabetes or cancer
- Poetry can't help find a great receptionist or straighten out billing problems
- Poetry can't find a way out from under the masses of paperwork
- Poetry can't change the shortcomings of the current healthcare system

# So What Good Is Poetry?

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- Poetry can help us reflect on our professions and our lives
- It can help change the way we see things, the way we *understand* things
- It can help us transcend the suffering of our patients and ourselves
- In doing so, poetry may help us heal



# What Can Poetry Offer the Busy Clinician?

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- It's short

# Haiku by Basho

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*How marvelous the  
man is  
Who can see a  
lightning flash  
And not think, "Life  
is so short!"*



# What Can Poetry Offer the Busy Clinician?

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- \* Its inclination for metaphor and imagery allows us to exercise our own creative imaginations
- \* Its ambiguity encourages multiple interpretations, multiple ways of understanding, so that we
  - rekindle our curiosity about people, things, and the world around us
  - remember how to feel genuine empathy for other voices and other perspectives



# What Can Poetry Offer?

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- It often concerns itself with questions of suffering and meaning
- It develops emotional connection and engagement to others and ourselves
- It can lead to renewal of awe and wonder with the practice of medicine, and with life itself

# A Good Poem...

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*Can help us see  
familiar  
experiences in  
new ways*



# 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.



# A Good Poem...

*Can help us to reflect on  
difficult patients in new ways*



# THE KNITTED GLOVE

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You come into my office wearing a blue knitted glove with a ribbon at the wrist.

You remove the glove slowly, painfully and dump out the contents, a worthless hand.

What a specimen! It looks much like a regular hand warm, pliable, soft. You can move the fingers

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**If it's not one thing, it's another.**

**Last month the fire in your hips had you down,  
or up mincing across the room with a cane.**

**When I ask about the hips today, you pass them off  
so I can't tell if only your pain**

**or the memory is gone. Your knitted hand**

**is the long and short of it. Pain doesn't exist**

**in the past any more than this morning does.**



**This thing, the name for your solitary days,  
for the hips, the hand, for the walk of your eyes  
away from mine, this thing is coyote, the trickster.**

**I want to call, *Come out, you son of a dog!***

**And wrestle that thing to the ground for you.**

**I want to take its neck between my hands**

**But in this world I don't know how to find**

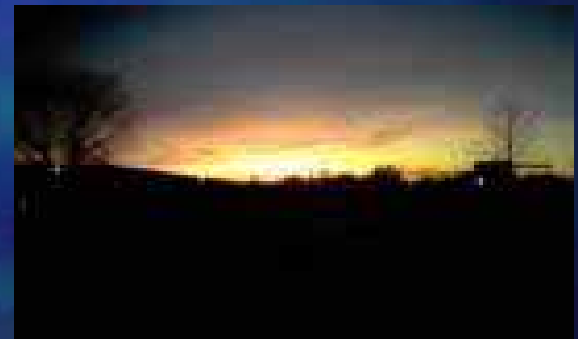
**the bastard, so we sit. We talk about the pain.**

**- Jack Coulehan, M.D.**



# A Good Poem...

*Can help us remember why  
medicine is still a calling, not  
just a career*



# *Night on Call*

*- Rita Iovino, M.D.*

There are sometimes such moments of magic,  
when the sky and mountains melt into the dawn  
when the blue-purple horizon yields to the sun,  
and the trek home

becomes a moment of epiphany.

Everything is still

and only the faint noise of sparrows  
permeates the air.

The exhaustion and sweat and scrubs  
become an exclamation of rebirth.

The gift of being a doctor

is magnified like dandelions blowing in the wind,  
and one knows the skill of giving life,  
the gift of alleviating pain;

the long night suturing becomes a dream  
because now one more person  
becomes whole by your latex gloves.

The sun breaks into a million bright lights  
as you go home to sleep.



# A Good Poem...

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- *Allows us to face our own vulnerability and limitations*
- *Gives us the courage to continue to care for patients*
- *Helps us find the grace to forgive ourselves*

# I Stepped Past Your Room Today

## - Gerry Greenstone, M.D.

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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.

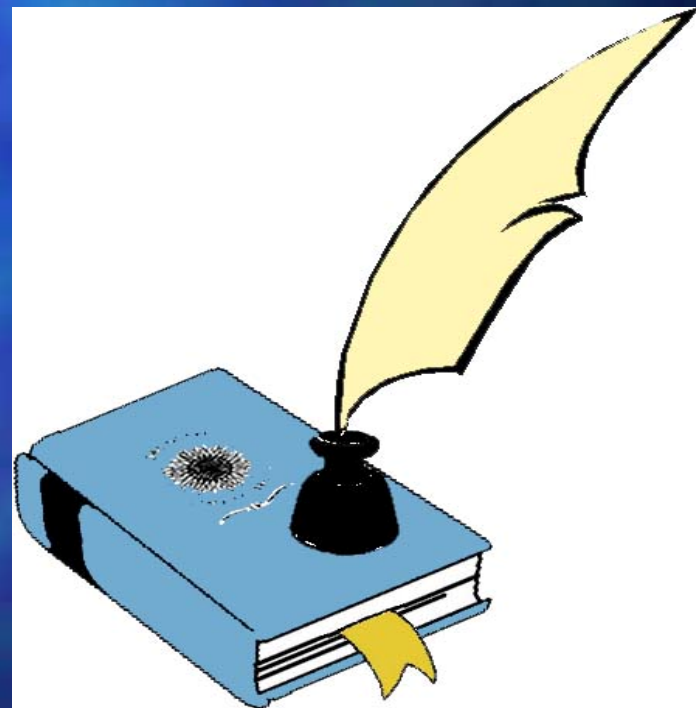
In the harsh glare of those white sheets  
I see the impotence  
Of myself as a physician  
Whose energy is aimed  
At cure and renewal.  
Can you understand  
What it means to face you  
Like this,  
Your courage against my fear?

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.



# Writing Poetry?

- If you already write poetry, keep writing!
- If you are thinking about putting pen to paper, do so!
- There may be much satisfaction, perhaps even healing, in this personal act of creation





# Poetic Remedies Can...

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- Cause us to reflect on our lives
- Reinvigorate daily activities that have become dull and oppressive
- Provide patience and insight into situations and people who frustrate and exasperate
- Remind us of the joy and meaning found in the profession of medicine
- Allow us to forgive ourselves and seek forgiveness
- In all these ways, poetry can help reconnect us with the heart, and art, of doctoring



# Medical Poetry Anthologies

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**Articulations: The Body and Illness in Poetry**

- Jon Mukand, ed.

**Uncharted Lines: Poems from JAMA**

- Charlene Breedlove, ed.

**Blood & Bone: Poems by Physicians**

- Angela Belli and Jack Coulehan, eds.

**The Naked Physician: Poems about the Lives of Patients and Doctors**

- Ron Charach, ed.

**Rafael Campo \* Jack Coulehan \* John Graham-Pole  
Peter Pereira \* Audrey Shafer\* John Stone \* Marc Straus**