

The Inner World of Medical Students: Listening to their Voices in Poetry

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Career Path?

- Not every path is a straight one!



Twists and turns!

Counseling psychologist

Clinical psychologist

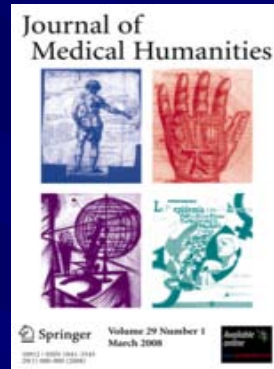
Health psychologist

Behavioral scientist

Medical humanities scholar

The writing life

■ Academic articles



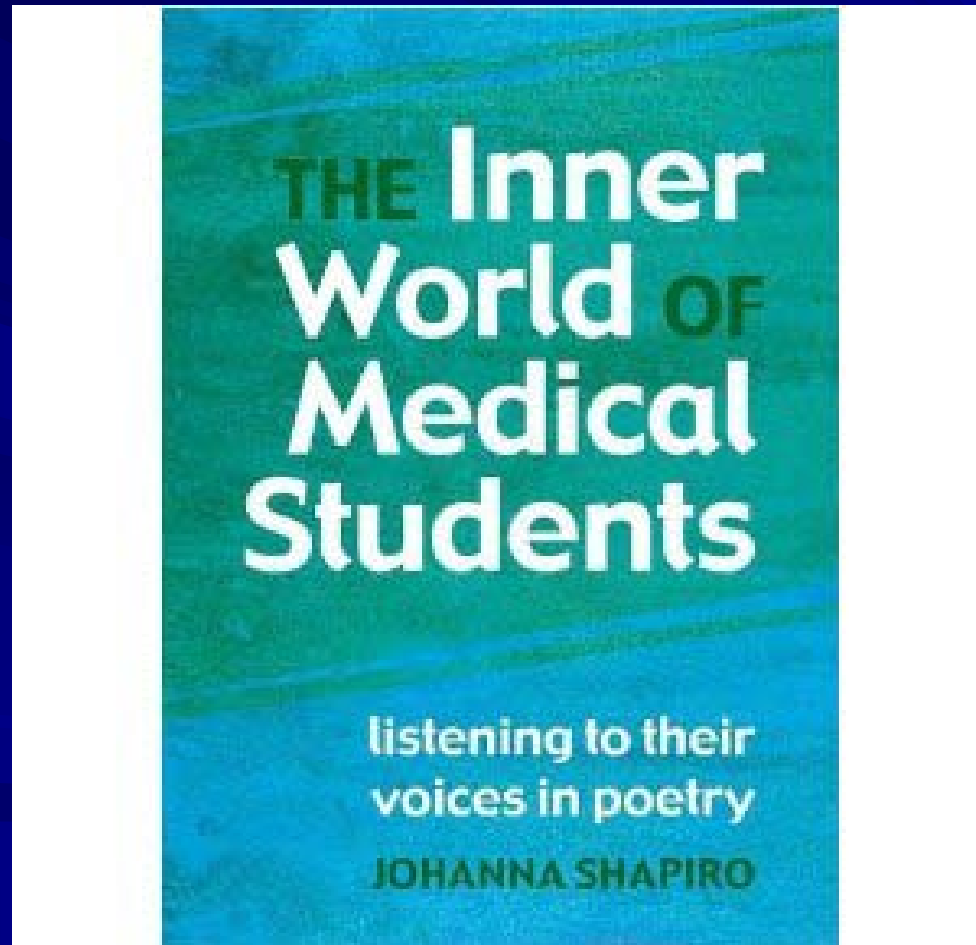
■ Feature editor



■ Personal poetry -

The Sarcoma Poems
Songs of Illness

Finally - A Book!



Why Inner Worlds?

- Always been interested in inner worlds and lives
- As a professional, important to "Know Thyself"
 - Reflection
 - Self-awareness
 - Clinical translation: insight into action
- So inner worlds matter
- Medical students wrestle mightily with important questions -
 - Who are we; how do we become who we are?
 - How can we understand others?
 - How should we respond to pain and suffering?
- But much of this wrestling only occurs in that "inner world," so have to look behind the façade of certainty, competence

Why Poetry?

- Formulaic, predictable pitfalls of prose
 - Medical school, residency personal statements
 - Conventional, pat language and structure
- Poetry taps into the unconscious better than prose
 - Metaphor, imagery reveal things beyond the ordinary
 - Can surprise even the author
- Examination of student poetry an ideal way to penetrate more deeply into their educational experience
- Plus, I like medical student poetry!

How I Selected the Poetry

- At UCI, students often wrote poetry to fulfill an assignment for a medical humanities course component
 - Not necessarily aspiring poets
- In-house literary journals have proliferated on medical school campuses
- Reviewed almost 600 poems
- Only included poems for which I received written permission from authors

Poetry analysis

- Topics emerged from inductive content analysis of student poems
 - Experience of Anatomy course (dissection)
 - Becoming a doctor
 - Becoming a patient (pt's experience of illness)
 - Patient-doctor and patient-medical student relationships
 - Social and cultural issues in patient care
 - Personal reflections on life and love
- Narrative typologies also used to categorize poems
 - Chaos
 - Restitution
 - Journey
 - Witnessing
 - Transcendence
- Most common typologies chaos and witnessing

My Hand - Dennis Cheng, MSIII

"I've never been sick a day in my life."

I think, you have HIV.

"I don't know why this is happening to me"

I think, you have Hep C liver cirrhosis.

"I just threw up 5 cups of blood!"

I think, with surprise, that's no big deal.

The team's seen worse.. and things are under control.

He says, "Tell me he's old enough to do this."

I tell him, "He's well-trained. He's good enough."

I think, my intern is only 27.

He says, "Tell me it won't hurt."

I tell him, "It's just a central line.

We need to give you blood and fluids."

I think, my intern must be sweating bullets.

He says, "I'm scared."

I tell him, "Don't move. You can squeeze my hand,

but just don't move."

I think, He can't move. Not when my intern

does the stick, he can't move.

I read my intern's eyes. He's scared too.

But we know what we have to do.

My Hand cont

He grabs my left hand. I smile.
Internally, I gasp. It's crushing.
"Anesthetic going in," R2 says. I
say comforting words.
Inside, I grimace in pain. He's
breaking my hand.
"Don't move," R2 says. "Putting
in line."
The patient grits his teeth and
moans.

I can no longer feel my hand.
But I smile and I tell the
patient
"Good job."
Because he didn't move.
He didn't move.
He didn't move.

It's over and he thanks me.
I smile. I feel like a member
of the team.
I think, maybe medical
students are good for
something
after all!
As I leave, I give him my hand
with a smile.

My right hand.

Themes

- Emotional distance
 - Patient's bewilderment/denial vs. student's expert knowledge
- Evolution of student/team
 - Control
 - Fear
 - Humanity
- Compassionate solidarity



What I learned

- Most medical students are bright, committed, and very brave
- At a young age, forced to confront
 - Necessary suffering (illness, decline, disability, death)
 - Unnecessary suffering (shortcomings of healthcare system and physician role-models)
- They are indeed strangers in a strange land
- Despite own struggles, often choose to engage deeply with patients
 - Sort out complex, nuanced dimensions of emotional proximity and distance
 - Strive for emotional steadiness and tenderness (Jack Coulehan)
 - Adopt positions of empathy and compassionate solidarity

Final thoughts

- Is there a link between what a student writes in a poem and clinical practice?
 - We don't know
- I believe writing a poem forges connections with real life
 - A form of catharsis
 - A way of forging something meaningful out of a challenging or significant experience
 - A kind of exploration or rehearsal
- Students become better doctors - and better people - through reflecting on their lives in poetry