

Protect Yourself From This

By Karen Fiser

Protect yourself from this, the sight
of the lumpish woman in plate glass
laboring to push herself along
in her coat, in the sun.

She looks to be a woman of a certain age,
a nice woman, but forlorn, with too much pain
in her face to be outdoors. You look away,
then swiftly back, to see her struggle with the chair
outside the heavy bank door, holding her packages upright
in her lap with her teeth.

She starts to mutter, how difficult
things are. For an instant you allow yourself to feel
her dread, her effort not to become
another crazy crying on a Berkeley street.

She is not what you feel yourself to be,
but what you see you are,
reflected in the world's unyielding surfaces.
You know you can never leave her, now.

Commentary

One of the central issues in medical education is how to respond to the suffering of others. Idealistic medical students think they will always respond with an altruistic approach impulse, in which they will naturally draw closer to the suffering other, feel empathy toward this other, and be moved to put the interests of the other above their own interests. Yet they may find that, more often than not, they exhibit an opposite, but equally strong, impulse to detach and separate from the contamination of others' suffering. Although this can be fear of literal contamination, it is more likely to be a desire to create emotional distance from the metaphoric contamination embodied in patients' inevitable vulnerability, helplessness, and loss of control. Yet pushing the patient away runs the risk of turning the patient into an object and justifies negative judgments, frustration, anger, and blame directed toward the patient. Although any patient can trigger the withdrawal response, patients who suffer from stigmatized conditions such as obesity, substance abuse, or other perceived "lifestyle choices," and patients who are perceived as "different" from the student, physically, mentally, culturally, or socioeconomically, are particularly vulnerable to the phenomenon of pulling back. The withdrawal impulse is rooted in psychodynamic phenomena of splitting and scapegoating, in which the withdrawing individual or group is protected from the perceived threat of difference by projecting all feared negative qualities onto the rejected other. Once we locate our own dissolution and vulnerability externally, our anxiety is ameliorated and becomes more manageable. Unfortunately, however, although we may feel better, the patient often feels worse—isolated, alienated, and demeaned.

Karen Fiser, a poet trained as a philosopher, and also someone with personal experience of pain and disability, explores these issues in her poem, "Protect yourself from this." She addresses herself to the presumably nondisabled Everyperson, the ubiquitous second-person "you." The first thing she does is warn the reader to "protect yourself." In this injunction we see

the impulse toward withdrawal, the pullback from contamination, the desire to keep oneself pure, boundaried, and safe. The poem then goes on to describe the commonplace (and therefore easily dismissed) occurrence of a person in a wheelchair attempting to enter a building through a heavy door. If we, the reader, have failed to "protect ourselves," we cannot fail to notice the woman's suffering: she is "forlorn," in pain, full of dread as she sees herself teetering on the brink of collapse, muttering about the difficulty of life. She is also somewhat pathetic and absurdly vulnerable. She wears a coat, although the sun is shining, probably because it is too complicated to remove it. She must hold her packages *in her teeth* while she maneuvers the door. As Fiser surmises, we try to avert our eyes—and our souls—from this encounter: we try to "look away," but our gaze irresistibly returns. Why?

Fiser cleverly uses the metaphor of reflection to suggest that it is more than mere voyeurism that pulls our gaze: it is also recognition. The final stanza confronts directly the warring impulses of identification and othering and poses a stark choice. We, the reader, want to see ourselves as very different from this miserable creature: "She is not what you feel yourself to be." To preserve our purity, competence, and invulnerability to suffering, pain, and loss of control, we eagerly assert that she is not-us; *she* is something wholly other. This is the withdrawal impulse in full flower, exemplifying psychological splitting and othering. But in the next lines, Fiser challenges this comforting distance: "She is . . . what you see you are." If we really look at this woman, we find ourselves in her. We recognize that her pain, her dread, and her struggles are our own. Literally, once we "look," our image is superimposed on hers; both are reflected in "the hard surfaces of the world." In Levinas's¹ terms, our face has merged with her face. Once this recognition occurs, once this connection is made, however accidentally or unwillingly, we are irrevocably linked: "You can never leave her now." Paradoxically, through our gaze, the ability to "leave," what is

sometimes more technically referred to as emotional abandonment of the patient, has become impossible—and the first steps toward an authentically altruistic response, grounded in acknowledgment of the similarities underlying perceived difference, have been taken.

Fiser's poem makes vivid for students—and the rest of us—the choices we make, often unconscious, but choices nonetheless, about how we position ourselves in relation to others. The poem also enables rigorous exploration of the philosophical premises underlying the impulses to draw nearer versus to pull away. Philosophers such as Julia Kristeva² have theorized in detail the modernist view of the pure, clean, stable, and invulnerable body that must be protected through rigid differentiating boundaries against contamination from everything in the world that threatens this idealized self. The psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has extensively analyzed the I/Other split, which leads us to differentiate and oppose ourselves to the other as a form of personal safeguarding.³ On the other hand, feminist scholars such as Margrit Shildrick⁴ argue that it is only by facing our imperfection, vulnerability, and fragility that we can lose our fear, and only by softening our boundaries that we will find the courage to embrace the damaged other—and our damaged selves. Engaging students in interrogating the implications of Fiser's poem allows us to reflect on these issues and decide on our moral relationship with the suffering other, whether through doctoring or simply through being.

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References

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- 3 Fryer DR. *The Intervention of the Other: Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan*. New York, NY: Other Press; 2004.
- 4 Shildrick M. *Becoming vulnerable: Contagious encounters and the ethics of risk*. *J Med Humanit*. 2000;21:215–227.