

COMMENTARY

Profile of Julie Phillips, MD, MPH: Family Physician, Medical Educator, Researcher, Poet

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Dr. Julie Phillips, an Associate Professor of Family Medicine at Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, has contributed several poems to *Families, Systems, and Health* over the last 2 years. This month's issue features her fourth poem in this journal, titled "Autumn Chores" (Phillips, 2015).

Julie has served as clerkship director for her department and was recently appointed Assistant Dean for Student Career and Professional Development. Her primary research focus is on physician workforce development, especially the effects of medical education and debt on medical student specialty choice. Her research has used large national datasets, survey methodology, and qualitative methods to better understand how students choose primary care careers. Much of her time is spent with the Sparrow–MSU Family Medicine residency, where she provides full-spectrum family medicine care, including hospital care and maternity care.

We were interested in learning more about Julie's creative writing, why she writes poetry, how she balances writing and a demanding academic medical career, and what she hopes her poems might contribute to clinical practice and medical education. Colleen Fogarty interviewed her to find out the answers.

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Julie, how did you get started writing?

I have loved writing for a long time. In elementary school, I wrote stories for my class. Other people liked them and encouraged me. Teachers said I was good at it. When I was young, I seriously thought about becoming a writer instead of a doctor, but I thought I would get too lonely.

Why do you write poetry?

Poetry is short, discrete. It captures a moment in time, a small idea or a small feeling, yet it is powerful and moving. I like to read poems. I like their immediacy, their brevity. Sometimes it feels easier than long writing forms. I've always thought it's valuable to produce things and I find joy in creating a "product" like a paper. But a paper takes a long time. I can write a poem in an hour and have a product that someone else can enjoy. Still, writing a poem is not as easy as it looks. Because it is a short form, you must choose your words carefully.

Do you have formal training in writing poetry?

I have no formal training in poetry per se. In college, I took some classes in creative writing—these were geared toward prose. I had friends who were writers, and we'd regularly read and critique each other's work.

Do you write prose fiction as well as poetry?

I write prose nonfiction, essays, letters to the editor. I write research reports too. I see a connection between the empirical and the creative: like creative writing, research re-

ports should be thoughtful, well-written, well-constructed, interesting, and enjoyable to read. No matter what I'm writing, I want it to be compelling and draw attention.

What do you do to sustain your commitment to writing?

Another family physician colleague at the residency started a women's writing group. Now five physicians and one social worker gather monthly to write and to share work. Only recently have I published some creative things. I now see this as something I can do not only for myself but also as part of my academic work.

How do you find time for writing?

Doing OB helps! I'm serious. There's a lot of time spent waiting for things to happen, just sitting around, especially if I'm covering for the day. It's a great time to start a poem!

How do you decide on a particular topic to write about?

It's whatever's on my mind. For example, I write a lot about issues that I'm trying to work through. I've written many things about my family that I haven't published because they feel private to me, and I'm not ready to have others ask me questions about them. I tend to write about what's bothering me. I also write about parenting. Recently I wrote about childbirth, and what that meant, what was hard about it and what was good about it. I write a lot about medicine.

Do you regard writing as in any way cathartic or therapeutic?

Is writing in some way a coping strategy? Yes! I think there's something about being able to put your problem or dilemma down on paper that gets distance from it. It gives me a nice way of processing things that are difficult or stressful, a way to examine a situation and get the emotions out.

Also, in writing, you can be sympathetic with yourself, almost as if you were looking at yourself from the outside. Writing for me is a way of looking at myself from

a distance and realizing I did the best I could.

Then too, writing is a way to show something of ourselves to others. In our writing group we share our work and talk about what we write. It's a good way to externalize and share what starts off as a troubling internal thing. This process of sharing helps to validate thoughts and feelings. Often we realize that we are not alone, that others have the same struggles as we do.

What do you think your poetry can teach medical students and contribute to medical education?

I hope that people will read it and talk about it. I hope my poetry stimulates conversations, because I write about things and problems that I think others can identify with. Sometimes I write to make people a little uncomfortable, or to challenge conventional wisdom. For instance, I began my poem, "Autumn Chores" because I get frustrated with students who feel like they're too good for certain tasks. That poem comes from a place of belief in the importance of being humble in medicine. You give your patient what they need. Cleaning out ear wax, filling out paperwork, trimming toenails, you do what you need to do, even if you do not like it. Physicians can get arrogant sometimes.

Julie's poems are indeed, as she says, carved from small moments in time, but they have a disproportionately large emotional impact. The images she crafts are vivid and compelling; her language is deceptively simple, yet elegant. Her poems tackle issues such as the tension between medical and parental authority; professional boundaries; work—life balance; the still-gaping holes in our health care system; and what it means to care for others. To read her work, please search the journal index.

Reference

Phillips, J. (2015). Autumn chores. *Families, Systems, & Health*, 33, 415. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fsh0000121>

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