

Commentary on “Anatomy Lesson”

We are in a first-year literature and medicine elective: 15 medical students, a family physician, and a psychologist. The psychologist is taking notes, partly for future discussion, partly because that is what psychologists do. It is December, and the students are embarked on their anatomy course. We go around the room, each student reading a couplet from Jack Coulehan’s poem “Anatomy Lesson.”

“Can you relate to the poem?” the facilitators ask. “What strikes you?”

The students talk about why the medical student narrator in the poem has named the cadaver “Ernest.” Someone says that earnest things are serious things. We talk about the ways in which dissection is serious business, how so much information and knowledge are riding on its mastery. A facilitator mentions a T.S. Eliot quote—“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?”—and wonders aloud what kind of wisdom might be riding on dissection. Students consider what else they might be learning through the process of dissection. They speculate about whether the cadavers are indeed their first patients, and the consequent need to treat them with respect, dignity, and caring. We hear testimony about imagining the lives of the donors, witnessing their past suffering, and expressing gratitude for their sacrifice.

Suddenly a student notes that cadavers aren’t given names anymore. “Why not?” the psychologist inquires. “Unprofessional,” several students chime in. “Ah, I see,” the psychologist responds, “What makes it unprofessional?” The students pause. They are sure *that* naming the cadaver is unprofessional; they are less sure why. Someone suggests the cadavers already have names; the students just don’t know them. Giving them a “fake” name seems disrespectful. Another student confesses wanting to name a cadaver, because it might create a more personal connection. The students reflect. Perhaps there can be value and affection in the act of bestowing a name, as well as the risk of impertinence.

We discuss the rich nature images that permeate the poem: cactus, caves,

canyons, fissures, faults, flowers, minerals. What can they mean? To some, dissection feels so *unnatural*, so wrong. They concede a sense of shame, the awareness that under normal circumstances they would be considered criminals and sociopaths for their actions. The physician facilitator nods and recalls his own experiences and mixed emotions during his first anatomy lesson.

Tentatively, other students argue that dissection is *beautiful*. They are awestruck by the natural mysteries unfolding with each cut. They question whether they should have these feelings. Is it possible that exploring the human body in this manner is similar to exploring the landmarks of the natural world?

We plunge into the language of faith and mystery. “Bless me,” the narrator beseeches, evoking the Catholic confessional. Students agree that they often seek the cadaver’s blessing or approval for the acts they are about to commit. Although the medical school can require these actions and the anatomy professor can normalize them, ultimately it is the cadavers themselves whom students hope will somehow acknowledge their confessions of wrongdoing. Only the cadavers can grant forgiveness and absolution. The cadavers are their guides and teachers, and their good opinion matters.

Suddenly, in the poem, the narrator is crying. Crying? No one admits they’ve actually cried during anatomy lab, but a couple of students acknowledge they’ve felt like it. Good, we say, and resurrect that dreaded word, “unprofessional.” Is crying unprofessional? Some feel it is, definitely. Others talk about shared humanity with the cadaver—and future patients. Tears are back on the table. One student thinks it would be important to make sure you are crying for the patient, not for yourself. Yes, but is discerning the difference always so easy?

And just *why* is the medical student in the poem crying? The narrator is careful to explain the reasons he is *not* crying: The tears are not about Ernest’s bad luck at having died, nor about the

student’s bad luck at being “indentured” in the dissection lab. Rather, he is crying for “all offenses / to the heart”; and he specifies that these include both offenses to the cadaver’s heart and to his own. He goes further, citing “the violence / of abomination.”

The students look uncomfortable. Are they committing abominations? They thought they were becoming doctors. We backtrack a bit. What exactly is an abomination? Thank goodness for iPads. We instantly learn that an abomination evokes “extreme hatred and disgust.” Surprisingly, a few students nod, contributing their view that dissection can be violent, even disgusting. There is a lot of murmuring about fat globules. But we stick with it. How might we do violence to another? Again that word *respect*. Someone points out it is easy to treat the cadaver as just an object, as only a means to the end of knowledge—and as we have learned, that way loss of wisdom lies. A voice from the back speculates whether lack of emotional connection to the cadaver (or the patient) can be an act of violence. Others agree it can.

Our time is running out, and we move on. The last lines of the poem remind us about the canyons and flowers. A different student sums up that sometimes dissection is horrible, and sometimes it is beautiful. We think about the horror and the beauty of dissection, and of medicine. We look for blessing and absolution.

Acknowledgments: Many thanks to the medical students who have chosen to participate in this elective year after year and have made it so worthwhile for the faculty.

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See facing page for poem.

Anatomy Lesson

By Jack Coulehan

When I move your body
from its storage drawer,
I brush my knuckles,
Ernest, on your three-days
growth of beard. Cheeks,
wet with formaldehyde,
prickle with cactus.
My eyes burn and blink
as if a wind of sand
blew through the room.

Bless me, Ernest,
for I cut your skin
to learn positions
and connections
of your parts—caves,
canyons, fissures, faults,
all of you. Show me.
Show me your flowers,
your minerals, the oil
of your spleen.

Do not mistake these tears.
These tears are not
for your bad luck
nor my indenture here,
but for all offenses
to the heart—yours, mine—
for the violence
of abomination.
Think of my tears as rain
staining your canyon walls,
filling your stream.
They touch the blossoms.