

## ANATOMY AND HUMANITIES(S)

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this session.

As the anatomy course draws to a close, you've probably figured out that passing anatomy requires an enormous amount of memorization and information acquisition. It's easy to get so caught up in mastering knowledge that you can forget the larger context – that you are dissecting former human beings as a critical first step on your path toward becoming physicians. Today, using the humanities and arts, I'm going to ask you to reflect with me on the *closeness* of life and death that you discover in anatomy, both within the cadaver itself (it is the body of someone once alive and now dead) and between the dead cadaver and living student; and what this juxtaposition of life and death might teach you as future physicians.

I'm going to start by having us consider this classic depiction, in which we see the living examining and learning from the dead, much as you do today:

- I. The Anatomy Lesson – Rembrandt (1632 – anatomist Nicolae Tulp)
  - A. What do you notice about this painting?
  - B. Art scholars have studied this painting and these are a few of the things they have to say
  - C. Cadaver is driven like a wedge between the living
    1. Symbolizes the way death interrupts and interferes with the living, something that is always harsh and disturbing
  - D. Light almost supernaturally emanates from the cadaver
    1. Brings into focus the living
    2. Suggests that although death is disruptive, it also highlights and illuminates life
  - E. The cadaver is motionless (dead); the observers are full of movement (alive)
  - F. Anatomy lesson
    1. The muscle Professor Tulp is manipulating with the forceps is the flexor digitorum superficialis
    2. Pulling on the muscle will cause the same movement of flexion in the proximal interphalangeal joints of the cadaver that the anatomist is modelling with the fingers of his own left hand
    3. In this way, the anatomist “reanimates” the cadaver through inducing movement; and this action symbolizes the fantasy of medicine to be able to triumph over death
    4. But the fact that both cadaver and professor are “making” a similar motion is also humbling because it reminds us of how little separates the living from the dead

Most medical educators speak of anatomy as the first real initiation into the profession of medicine. But it is also, for many students, an initiation into death. We can see this in this quote from Perri Klass.

## **II. Initiation**

- A. Rite of passage – secret society of physicians**
- B. Violation of normal behaviour, normal relationships between dead and living**
- C. The hoped-for reward is not only factual knowledge of anatomy, but also some greater understanding of life and death**
- D. But what, of anything, can the cadaver teach us in this philosophical sense?**
- E. The answer in part is dependent on how we view the cadaver, what we think the cadaver to be**

## **III. What – or who – is the cadaver?**

- A. Is the cadaver a tool for learning?**
- B. Is the cadaver a (former) human being?**
- C. Is the cadaver both/neither/something in between?**
- D. What are the implications for you as future physicians?**

## **IV. Juxtaposition of Life and Death Within the Cadaver Itself**

- A. We find the juxtaposition of life and death within the cadaver itself**
- B. Some people say the cadaver is just a pile of desiccated flesh stretched over muscle, nerve, and bone, a tool for learning; whatever spirit animated it has long since fled (anatomy text illustration)**
- C. Others call the cadaver, somewhat romantically, the student’s first patient (bodyworlds runner)**
  - 1. Some students fear that the cadaver may be their best patient**
  - 2. One who never complains, never questions, always cooperates**
- D. Truth lies somewhere in between, what has been called: The Puzzling Dual Nature of Cadavers**
  - 1. Part biological specimen/part human being**
  - 2. Goal for student: integration of both biologic and human aspects, or at least its residual human aspects, in their interactions with the cadaver**

## **V. Views of dissection**

- A. An example of how dissection may be both a mechanical and a human experience is found in this excerpt from Anatomy Diary about the dissection of the heart.**
- B. Literal, biological death of heart – something bursts, death results; it is a mechanical demise**
  - A. But there is another death present as well, which the student detects: a metaphorical death of heart**
  - B. So there are two types of death existing simultaneously in this cadaver – biological death and emotional, spiritual death**
  - C. The professor wants to keep these separate rather than integrated, and mocks the student’s observation**
  - D. But the student realizes that both the anatomic and the human reality co-exist concurrently in Frank; that death must be understood humanistically**

and metaphorically as well as biochemically and mechanically in order for it to have meaning

The following quotation from the 19<sup>th</sup> c. German poet Goethe helps us consider the juxtaposition of death and life that occurs in the act of dissection by comparing the dead cadaver and the living dissector/student.

#### **VIII. Relationship between student and cadaver**

- A. Subject/object relation: I/It**
- B. Subject/subject relation: I/Thou**
  - 1. Wise guide, teacher**
  - 2. First patient**
- C. Picture this – Katherine Miller**
  - 1. Poem suggests the intimacy, interconnection between cadaver and student**
  - 2. Sense of being torn up, search for wholeness**

#### **IX. Interaction between student and cadaver**

- A. Subject to object**
- B. Subject to subject**
  - 1. Respect and dignity**
  - 2. Caring for another**
- C. Hands poem**
  - 1. Role-modeling of anatomist**
  - 2. Relationship of hands of anatomist, cadaver, and student**
  - 3. Why does the student keep the hands of the cadaver covered?**

#### **X. Feelings toward the cadaver**

- A. Feelings toward objects**
  - 1. Detachment/distance**
  - 2. Non-feeling**
- B. Feelings toward subjects**
  - 1. Guilt, shame**
  - 2. Awe, wonder**
  - 3. Gratitude, appreciation**
- C. Forgive me poem – feels guilt at having forgotten guilt; beseeches forgiveness**

#### **XI. Memento mori**

- A. In this way, the cadaver becomes a memento mori for the student**
- B. Let's consider this concept of memento mori from the perspective of an experienced physician. This poem was published a couple of years ago in JAMA.**

#### **IX. Living and Dead in Relationship: The Long View**

- A. Violation**
- B. Pretending**

- C. The things the dead tell**
- D. Do you think your cadavers have anything to tell you? Are you listening?  
What are they saying?**

**What has the juxtaposition of your life with the dead cadaver meant to you?**

**XII. What does all this mean? Concluding thoughts:**

**A. In medicine, life and death are inextricably mingled**

- 1. In medicine, in the presence of life, death is often close at hand;**
- 2. In the presence of death, it is so important to honor the life that was, that has so recently vanished**

**B. The attitudes you bring to the cadaver are easily extended to living patients, for better or for worse**

**1. in the ordinary life of the physician, it is critical to acknowledge how easy it is to slip from respect to disrespect; to forget the humanity of the patient in the fascination of the diagnosis; to become so absorbed pursuing necessary lab tests and procedures that the dignity of the patient is sacrificed**

**2. Perhaps if the cadaver becomes your memento mori, your advisor, the lesson he or she has to teach is that the living, the dying, and the dead deserve to be treated with equal compassion, generosity, respect, and kindness**