

## COMMENTARY

“Storytelling as a Vehicle of Healing”: Johanna Shapiro, PhD,  
Professor, Psychologist, Poet, Medical Humanities ScholarJo Marie Reilly, MD, MPH  
Keck School of Medicine of USC

This commentary reflects the professional life story of a respected editor, poet, and champion of medical humanities, Johanna Shapiro. A psychologist by training, Johanna’s work in medical humanities is well known and respected by health professionals in multiple venues. It is within family medicine that Johanna found her professional home. Her work has focused on the value of storytelling as a vehicle of healing, helping health professionals at all levels of training better understand their patients’ experiences of illness and healing. The understanding helps patients more deeply connect to their illness and wellness. This commentary offers a tribute to Johanna’s professional life and her contributions to family and narrative medicine.

*Keywords:* Shapiro, medical humanities scholar


Quiet friend who has come so far,  
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.  
Let this darkness be a bell tower  
and you the bell. As you ring,  
what batters you becomes your strength.  
Move back and forth into the change.  
What is it like, such intensity of pain?  
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.  
In this uncontainable night,  
be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,  
the meaning discovered there.  
And if the world has ceased to hear you,  
say to the silent earth: I flow.  
To the rushing water, speak: I am.

(Rilke, 1922/1989)

Dr. Johanna Shapiro, a professor in the Department of Family Medicine, University of California, Irvine, is a respected and gifted teacher, poet, and editor. She has spent decades championing medical humanities as a necessary discipline in the data- and scientifically driven medical world in which health professionals treat patients. She has called us to the art of medicine, reminding health care professionals both of the value of their role in patient relationships and of the impact of illness on patients’ lives. As in Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem “Let This Darkness Be a Bell Tower” above, Shapiro’s work bears witness to those in society who struggle with illness and need to be reconnected to their souls, to find purpose in their darkness and meaning in their journeys to self.

Johanna’s connection to writing is deep within her genetic makeup, something she always came back to during her life because it refreshed, renewed, and connected her to herself. She grew up in a family of writers and teachers. Her father wrote comedy for radio and TV, and he and her mother wrote novels together. As a child she was exposed to the rich world of language, metaphor, and rhythm in written word and expression. She learned the value and importance of words from an early

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to  Jo Marie Reilly, MD, MPH, Department of Family Medicine, Keck School of Medicine of USC, 1975 Zonal Avenue, KAM B-30, Los Angeles, CA 90033. E-mail: [jmreilly@usc.edu](mailto:jmreilly@usc.edu)

age and how powerfully their particular pairing and ordering speak to a larger world. Whereas others grow up afraid of poetry and writing, Shapiro's gentle inculcation with written language as a child set her on a course that would later define much of her career and passion. She wrote her first poem and "novel" when she was 7 and then left writing for years. She came back to it in college as an English major, when she won a French poetry-writing contest as an undergraduate. She describes the experience as "folding me back into my earlier life and reconnecting . . . in a Jungian way to an 'unfulfilled portion of myself' that I abandoned but value(d) and tried to reclaim" (J. F. Shapiro, personal communication, December 2019).

After devoting over 15 years to the traditional practice of psychology as a behavioral scientist in the University of California, Irvine (UC Irvine), Department of Family Medicine, she felt constrained by the parameters of this role from doing the work she was increasingly drawn to do in the humanities. It was her own bout with illness and a retinal detachment that reunited her with poetry and its ability to redefine "the mystery at the crossroads of (her) senses, and the meaning discovered" (Rilke, 1922/1989). Gifted with a book of Emily Dickinson's poetry during the difficult period of recovery, she discovered the capacity of the poet to capture the experience of illness and suffering in a way that gave her comfort and the resilience to heal. Dickinson (1891/1999), also having suffered eye disease, speaks about

Hope is the thing with feathers—

That perches in the soul—

And sings the tune without words—

And never stops— at all . . .

(Dickinson, 1891/1999)

Johanna's personal experience with illness and the profound impact Dickinson's poetry had in her healing was a sentinel event that birthed her subsequent 20-year career in literary medicine.

Making the transition from behavioral medicine to medical humanities, Johanna received support from her institution and department to introduce a literature and medicine class that integrated patient and doctor stories into medical student training. This course began a deci-

sive shift in her professional journey from formal psychology to "using the psychological insights found in the arts as a 'different way' to get at the core meaning and values of medicine" (J. F. Shapiro, personal communication, December 2019). "Medicine is so controlled by the electronic medical record and the boxes you click now. While having patients care systemized and standardized is important, we can't lose our connections with our patients. The arts can help physicians remember the humanity of their patients while maintaining their own humanity" (J. F. Shapiro, personal communication, December 2019).

It is Johanna's work defining and championing medical humanities and arts that so personifies the footprint that she will leave in her retirement. "I certainly didn't birth medical humanities in family medicine, but I caught it in its adolescence and was part of a large village helping it to grow into maturity" (J. F. Shapiro, personal communication, December 2019). UC Irvine had no medical humanities program, but Johanna used the Office of Medical Education and the family medicine department as a platform to "bring a glimmer of medical humanities" to both the medical school and the main campus (J. F. Shapiro, personal communication, December 2019). Over the years, this glimmer blossomed into a robust program with required or elective curriculum across all 4 years of medical school training, as well as a student-initiated humanities research program and a journal of original arts and literature, *Plexus*. In the last 6 years, she has had the opportunity to work with various main campus entities to assist in establishing a UCI Center for Medical Humanities as well as an undergraduate minor in medical humanities.

Through multiple editorial opportunities, grants, and interprofessional work, Johanna became a national voice for the connection between illness and medical humanities as a source of healing and wellness. She has been a "quiet" champion behind the scenes—helping her colleagues see narrative work as a respected and necessary discipline, one that defines compassion and helps reconnect the health care professional to the patient. Her body of work expounds on medical humanities "as an instance of a seamless connection between the sciences and the arts" as well as representing "the best exemplars of the promise and necessity of

crossing the chasms between ways of knowing toward new and powerful ways of being and healing.” (Charon, 2006, p. viii).

As a humanities educator and champion, Johanna has trained and mentored countless health professionals—physicians and behavioral scientists—at the community, state, and national levels through her poetry, humanities editorial work, courses, conferences, and presentations. Her teaching has empowered others through astute insights into the healing power of literature and the arts. She has helped learners understand that poetry opens up new dimensions of understanding and connection. Johanna encourages health professionals at all levels of training to explore relationships and emotional expression in patients and families by appreciating the alternative points of view often discovered in literature and poetry. Her teaching and scholarship challenge us to see more deeply into the stories of patients, medical students, and doctors and to realize that storytelling offers both patients and doctors a vehicle for healing. She has always promoted awareness among the medical community that storytelling and writing “help doctors (and all health professionals) be attuned to their inner life, to the inner life of patients and families, and to the intersubjective dance between them” (Stein, 2013, p. 46).

Johanna’s work encourages us to rethink how we educate health care professionals, particularly physicians. In medical education there is a “dichotomy between what is essential in medicine and what is nice,” with “nice” aspects of training encompassing the study of arts and literature (J. F. Shapiro, personal communication, December 2019). Her pedagogical and academic efforts have been directed toward creating “a shift in balance so that a physician can be more of a renaissance person who knows how to utilize both science and art in caring for patients, colleagues, and self” (J. F. Shapiro, personal communication, December 2019). Johanna sometimes fantasizes about a medical education system where arts and literature are not a “delightful filler” (J. F. Shapiro, personal communication, December 2019) but instead deeply integrated into medical education in a comprehensive way. She imagines a world where in the “day-to-day of a physician’s practice, they (physicians) use improvisational theater skills at least as often as they apply anatomical knowledge” (J. F. Shapiro, personal

communication, December 2019). She also reminds us that

literature is an antidote to burnout and increases our compassion. Literature and arts can reinspire us, help us understand other’s perspectives, engender greater empathy, let us hear other’s voices that we can’t always hear, and urge us to focus on social justice in health care. (J. F. Shapiro, personal communication, December 2019)

In her book *The Inner World of Medical Students: Listening to Their Voices in Poetry*, Shapiro (2009) describes the power that poetry has to keep students connected to the humanity which initially drew them to medicine. She observes that medical training

attempts to order the world by relying on knowledge that can be obtained by reductionism, objectivity, and essentialism, as well as logical, rational thinking, and relationships that can be controlled by hierarchy, authority, and power. This leads to models of understanding and relationships that are excessively formulaic, rule-bound, and lacking in human connection.

Because poetry influenced her own life as a source for healing with various illnesses, she has used and modeled it for students, patients, and all health professionals to help connect them with their own health and wellness journeys. “I have had the good fortune in my work to see that both medicine and writing, with a little luck and a little grace, can save and can heal” (J. F. Shapiro, personal communication, December 2019). She reflects on her own journey,

Am I a better person  
when I write?  
Not always, but sometimes  
in that moment when I write  
I discover  
a world in which I am not afraid  
a world that still belongs to me.

(Shapiro, 2011, p. 6)

She has seen how poetry connects reader and writer in a way that builds community and creates flexibility, hope, and nuanced interpretation in a biomedical world that does not often offer such freedom (Shapiro & Rucker, 2003).

Johanna’s personal and professional work with poetry also called her to a national stage as the arts and literature editor for multiple family

medicine journals, including *Family Systems and Health (FSH)*. In the latter role, she has done transcendent and transformative work connecting, collecting, and honing narrative work—shaping the poetry of physicians, patients, students, and psychologists, guiding their work to publication. In her 15 years as editor or coeditor of the *FSH* narrative medicine section; she has worked with three different editors in chief; written commentaries on poems; and seen the growth of the arts and literature section, *Sharing Our Stories*, to now comprise poetry, 55-word stories, narrative, and haiku. She brings a gracious, gentle editorial wisdom; keen eye; judicious words; and an astute and spot-on analysis of medical humanities and its nuances. Her work calls us to consider medical storytelling as a powerful tool, allowing us to transcend the boundaries of medicine and speak to the depths of humanity, its people, illness, and wellness.

With her compassion as poet, medical humanities advocate, teacher, and scholar, Johanna reminds us that the gift and blessing of medical humanities is its ability to honor and bear witness to ourselves, our families, patients, teachers, and colleagues. Beyond those to whom we are literally connected, her work recognizes the shared vulnerability and courage of “everyone who is born (and) holds dual citizenship in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick” (Sontag, 1978, p. 3) be-

cause she knows that we are all worthy of this solidarity.

## References

- Charon, R. (2006). *Narrative medicine: Honoring stories of illness*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Dickinson, E. (1999). “Hope” is the thing with feathers. In R. W. Franklin (Ed.), *The poems of Emily Dickinson* (p. 314). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1891)
- Rilke, R. M. (1989). Let this darkness be a bell tower. In S. Mitchell (Ed. & Trans.), *The selected poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. New York, NY: Vintage International. (Original work published 1922)
- Shapiro, J. (2009). *The inner world of medical students: Listening to their voices in poetry* (1st ed.). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Shapiro, J. (2011). *My world*. Retrieved from <https://Johannashapiro.org/medical-humanities-arts-presentations>
- Shapiro, J., & Rucker, L. (2003). Can poetry make better doctors? Teaching the humanities and arts to medical students and residents at the University of California, Irvine, College of Medicine. *Academic Medicine*, 78, 953–957. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/00001888-200310000-00002>
- Stein, H. F. (2013). Why I write: Reflections from 40 years of clinical teaching and writing. *Family Medicine*, 45, 46–47.
- Sontag, S. (1978). *Illness as a metaphor*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Received April 14, 2020

Accepted April 15, 2020 ■