

Anatomy Creative Projects I 2010

██████████, I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. Fortunately I was assigned yours. What a well-crafted and moving poem! You obviously know something about putting a poem together (nice partial rhyme couplet at the end!). More importantly, you also know something about the dimensions of the human heart – your own and your cadaver's. Your poem expresses beautifully that double movement that medicine requires between science and art, between required brutality and human fellow feeling. The title is not only clever because of the double-entendre, but insightful. The cadaver's heart "broke" (you imagine) as the result of failed love; it broke again from blocked arteries, resulting in his demise; you further broke his heart in the act of dissection; and the death of this man, the tragedies he endured while living, and the (necessary) destruction inflicted on him even after death can be, well, heartbreaking. Nuanced and perceptive writing. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Dear ██████████, I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. You nailed the purpose of this exercise in your essay. There is a lot of "meaning" floating around in the dissection lab, and it is up to medical students to find it (a harder undertaking than locating most anatomical structures). Even though medical school seems inordinately test-driven, you are so right that this is not primarily about getting a right answer on a test. It is about people's lives and people's pain. Although it seems incredible right now, it is surprisingly easy to forget this. I hope you don't.

I really enjoyed how you made anatomy "come alive," how you are connecting each structure to a very real human consequence. Keep connecting those dots, it is what makes the practice of medicine constantly intriguing and meaningful.

I also appreciated the respect and gratitude your essay extended toward the cadavers you are learning from. They probably thought a great deal before agreeing to donate their bodies; so I think it is just that you have spent time speculating about their reasons, in particular what might make them "proud." This speaks to the "meaning" of donation, the "meaning" of dissection, and perhaps the "meaning" of medicine.

Thank you for such a thoughtful essay. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Hi ██████████, I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. I was touched by your letter to the cadavers. You chose an intimate and personal form (who writes letters these days! :-)) which automatically moved you closer to the (former) personhood of the cadaver. After all, you wouldn't write a letter to an ophthalmoscope (I don't think :-)). It was

interesting that the preservative-induced distortions of the cadavers actually comforted you initially. Yet you saw beyond the superficial appearance to acknowledge their humanity by thinking of the act of donation, a decision each of those cadavers had to make. You ask some excellent questions about what the cadaver really understood about the process of dissection. Questions like these arise in the minds of many medical students, and I suspect you are right, no one knows unless you've been a medical student. But I think they *did* know that they wanted to be of use, and to make a contribution, even after death; and this is something we should not deny them.

I also resonated to your distinction between the “physical you” and the “soul-you.” With the cadaver, this is a relatively easy line to draw (yet surprisingly not!) because the “soul-you” is no longer present. In real patient care, the two are simultaneously present, and somehow you must learn to attend to both together. If you keep paying attention and keep reflecting, you will :-). Best, Dr. Shapiro

Hi [REDACTED], I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. I enjoyed your essay, especially that you chose to adopt the cadaver's voice and point of view. Very nice touch. Also, through the eyes of the cadaver, your observations of “the medical student,” who is “excited” yet “uncomfortable”, are astute and insightful. One issue I thought you addressed particularly well is that concept of respect. This is one of those concepts that everyone talks about as being so important (and it is). But you take the critical next step and begin to wonder, exactly *how* is one respectful toward a cadaver that you must progressively dissect? And the (perhaps surprisingly) equally challenging corollary, how is one respectful to a patient whom you subject to painful procedures, to whom you can't provide definitive diagnostic answers etc.?

I also liked how well you were able to identify “the medical student's” feelings (hesitation, reluctance, disgust, caring) while also honoring the person's choice to donate. This back-and-forth between your emotions and the patient's emotions, values, desires, and preferences is a critical part of knowing how to respond to choices patients make that may seem strange or even incomprehensible to you. “The medical student,” *you*, need to trust that this woman *wanted* to be there, even if she didn't know every detail of what would happen. All of us are making choices all the time that take us down paths that turn out to be quite unexpected (think medical school :-)). Thank you for exploring these issues with such sensitivity. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Hi [REDACTED], I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. I'm so glad I got yours! I really like the metonymy of the human body as representing humanity and science, and its implication that they should both fit together seamlessly. Even though laypeople might prioritize the “feeling” side, without the knowledge that we've gained through identification,

categorization, and understanding of the science that feeling side would often be much worse off. This was clever and cute, but also makes a critically important point. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Dear [REDACTED], I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. Loved the title of your essay – I think many, many students in anatomy have these moments as well. What I'd like you to consider is the next phrase – "... and later become desensitized to." I wonder if desensitization is either inevitable or desirable. For better or worse, medicine is a profession that provides you with many opportunities to think about death. I'd like to suggest this can be a good thing, as death is a fact of life; and "visiting" death as depressing, as natural, as horrifying, as meaningless, as full of meaning is part of the process for making room in your life for death. One of the ways you can do that, as you say so eloquently, is to appreciate both the fragility and the preciousness of life. Thank you for sharing your "moment." Best, Dr. Shapiro

Hi [REDACTED], I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. Fortunately, I was assigned your wonderful poem. Loved the line, "Act cool, nobody wants to be the one who barfs" – so straightforward, so honest, gets right at the fear of vulnerability and "wimpiness", both "bad" qualities in medicine. It also introduces what will continue to be an important issue for you – and all your peers – in medicine: to what extent is medicine a performance (especially one for which you are evaluated)? The poem exudes a certain macho ethic – "let's do this," "I can do this," "I just hugged a dead guy". And that is great, because medicine requires a certain toughness. But the title of the poem is very different – "embrace" is a word we use to refer to lovers, or parents and children. It bespeaks a moment of intimacy when you were, for a moment, flesh to flesh, nothing mediating, nothing between you – and death. Very well done! Best, Dr. Shapiro

Hi [REDACTED], I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. Thank you for your letter to cadaver Doe. I like the format of a letter because it is intimate, even old-fashioned, and very personal. Right away it acknowledges your cadaver's humanity. I *really* liked your awareness that the cadaver is a teacher on multiple levels, not only of anatomy, but of death and its implications for life. Your conceit that most of us regard the dead as a special category of human, to whom different rules must have applied is extremely insightful. Ernst Becker wrote a classic *The Denial of Death*, in which he dissects (pardon the pun) how resistant and avoidant our culture is toward death. I have heard many medical students describe anatomy as entailing a loss of innocence. This seems true to the extent that you are confronted with the reality of death. But as you point out, physicians take a stand against death (at least against preventable death), attempt to ameliorate suffering, and support life. The struggle against death is, as

you note, ultimately futile. But along the way, you can do a lot of good – and some of that good is indeed learned from your cadaver. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Dear [REDACTED], I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. I was fortunate enough to receive your intriguing and creative poem. I like the way you played with the stages of dying (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) from the perspective of the cadaver. It's both an interesting exercise in imagination and also addresses an issue that bother so many students: do the donors *really* understand what they've consented to? Your poem suggests that for cadavers too coming to terms with dissection is a process; but that, at least for some, they achieve an acceptance, a sense of larger purpose. This is truly original thinking! Very nice work. Dr. Shapiro

Dear [REDACTED], I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. First, please accept my condolences on the passing of your grandmother; and thank you for entrusting us through this project with this personal experience. Second, I so appreciate your openness to the connections between your grandmother and the cadavers. This is obviously a hard thing emotionally to accept, but I think may help cultivate an attitude of respect for the cadavers, as well as inculcate the awareness that all your future patients are also someone's grandmother, father, son, aunt etc. I am happy for you that the actual moment of dissection, as opposed to the anticipation of it, was a positive experience. I was especially touched by your realization that, just as your grandmother would always be with you, so would these cadavers (and your future patients), and that this is a good thing. Your essay is a wonderful reflection on the deepest implications of anatomy, and I think you have defined it for yourself in a unique and meaningful way. It was an honor to read your thoughts. Dr. Shapiro

Hi [REDACTED], I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. I received your poem, which I really enjoyed. The visual is very clever! And it is interesting that although you will end up knowing so much about the cadavers, you will never know any of their "living" secrets. I liked the way you imagined the cadaver crying out to be "recognized," to have her face seen. I wonder what it will be like for you when the faces are revealed. For me, the most impressive insight in the poem is the lines: "Let them ease their way into my humanity/ to seeing we are the same." It expresses patience with the process of anatomy (and the process of becoming a physician), the recognition that it takes time and doesn't happen all at once. The final phrase is profound because it acknowledges that, in a way, you and the cadaver, you and your (future) patients, you and the colleagues you like and those you don't, you and the supervisors you emulate and those you reject – all are "the same," all part of a common humanity. This is the foundation of all compassionate, nonjudgmental, and empathic care. Very nicely done. Dr. Shapiro

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Hello ██████████, I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. I read your poem, "Scalpel, Please..." with more than a few chuckles (I especially liked the idea of Trivial Pursuit, the anatomy version :-)). And I also enjoyed your enthusiasm and excitement. The learning can be overwhelming as you note, but as you also realize there are countless opportunities for awe and wonder. You will find this initial experience repeated continually throughout your medical school career (and beyond). The learning rarely slows down, but there is a risk that the sense of wonder is blunted. Keep your sense of awe alive, and medicine will be an inspiring and fulfilling career. Thank you for this witty poem. Dr. Shapiro

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Hello, ██████████, I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. First, nice job of detecting Dr. Leonard's dry but witty sense of humor :-). Second, you provided a wonderful description of the first day of anatomy, from nausea to excitement to encountering the cadaver's humanity to the incredible awesomeness (and variation) of the human body (and back to nausea :-)). As you summed it up so well, what a day! Third, you imagined a kind and understanding cadaver, supportive and encouraging of the medical students. It was an inspired idea to write from both your own and the cadaver's perspective. That ability to move back and forth between your own view and that of your future patients will be invaluable as you proceed through your clinical training and beyond. Thank you for expending so much thought and effort on this project! Best, Dr. Shapiro

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Hello, ██████████, I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects, and I was fortunate enough to receive your point of view writing. You did a wonderful job of imagining the cadaver's voice. You captured her humanity beautifully. I also liked that the cadaver addressed the med student directly, pulling the student closer, as it were, highlighting the similarities. Through this essay, you allowed your cadaver to be your teacher – and I think you heard the lessons she had to offer and took them to heart. I was particularly impressed by the insight you shared about control. You know, as a group, physicians (and medical students!) have high needs for control. Up to a point that's a good thing, because it means they are people who are not afraid to take charge, make decisions, intervene. But as you wisely observe, many, many things about patient care – and life – do lie beyond our active control; and learning how to make peace with that reality also characterizes a good doctor. It's wonderful that you are aware of this at such an early point in your training. Finally, I loved that you were able to acknowledge and even embrace the "oneness" of you and your cadaver. This capacity to find similarities and common bonds between yourself and someone seemingly so different (yeah, right you're like a cadaver, I can hear some skeptics saying) is really the foundation of becoming a good doctor.

The essay itself was very well-written. The repetition of the phrase “I am so much more” was quite moving; I think it represents the cry of all patients, who pray that the doctor will see them as a unique person, not simply a burst appendix or congestive heart failure. The last line was poetic and inspiring. An outstanding project. Best, Dr. Shapiro

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Hello ██████████, I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students’ anatomy creative projects. I enjoyed your point of view poem very much. Adopting your cadaver’s perspective gave you free rein to exercise your imagination! I especially liked the idea of the “spa day”! I also was intrigued by the cadaver’s feeling that she was being “punished” by dissection – I think it speaks to students’ worries about the nature of informed consent: do donors *really* understand what they are consenting to? Nevertheless, the most interesting – and human! – insight for me in the poem was the concluding line: “Today I will enjoy my new life.” I suspect it is this attitude of resilience that enables donors to make the decision to give their bodies. My own fantasy is that the cadavers were individuals who in life were adaptable, hardy, generous, perhaps a bit adventurous, buoyant somehow – people who knew how to live in the moment, whatever that moment was. So I like to think that despite the brutality of dissection, if anyone could “enjoy” the experience, it would be them :-). Thanks for stimulating my thinking. Best, Dr. Shapiro

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Hi ██████████, I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students’ anatomy creative projects, and fortunately I was assigned your wonderful series of haiku (which by the way are harder to write than it looks!). What an insight that the dead cadaver can bring you to life! This expresses a thrilling synchronicity and interconnectedness, which is a phenomenon I hope you will continue to be aware of this phenomenon as you begin actual patient care. Like the cadaver, your future patients will give you opportunities, will answer your questions, will help you know more, and (if you let them) at times will comfort you. In a profound sense, it is quite true that they help make you more fully alive, more fully you, even as you do your best to restore their own lives and health. It’s a complicated, though deeply meaningful, relationship, and it is heartening to see you reflecting on it at such an early point in your training. Thanks again for such a lovely contribution. Dr. Shapiro

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Dear ██████████, I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students’ anatomy creative projects. I feel really lucky that I received the Leonardian’s interview with the cadaver Bertha M. It is a very clever conceit, written in a very witty manner, and also addressed some terrific questions. Although many students worry that the donor would have second thoughts if they really understood what happened during dissection, I like Ms. M’s more adventuresome attitude (and as one who still favors the ashes and ocean scenario, I will be much less complacent

about my choice after hearing Ms. M's perspective :-)). It was also a nice twist to conceptualize "cadaving" as a kind of career that one might decide on much as one might choose a career in say, doctoring :-). And in this part of the interview, you offer what struck me as a really insightful reason as to why some people make the decision to donate their bodies – to continue to somehow be part of this weird, wonderful thing we call life. I also liked a lot what you wrote about having "fun" in the lab. Respect is not the same as stultifying formality (your future patients are not going to benefit from such an attitude). You *should* enjoy dissection, indeed medicine, otherwise you are probably not in the right profession. I think your cadavers, your patients will want you to get pleasure from what you do – just not at their expense. Very original – and fun! – project. Regards, Dr. Shapiro

Dear [REDACTED], I am part of the faculty team that reads and responds to students' anatomy creative projects. I was fortunate enough to receive your creative project essay, which I appreciated reading very much. First, please let me express my condolences for passing of both of your grandmothers. That relationship is a very special one, and when it is gone it is a deep loss.

In terms of your essay, I liked your realization that anatomy is more than "just" learning all about the anatomical structures (although that would be plenty!), and also (if the student is willing) involves a "journey" with the cadaver. Your realization that the cadaver is someone's grandmother, mother, sister, daughter is one I hope will always stay with you – because your future patients too are always someone's loved one, although at times it can be hard to remember this. Just as the cadaver is giving you a gift, so too will all your patients being giving you a gift as well (and of course you will be giving them a gift – of care and when possible of cure). In my view, it is this awareness of the "personalness" of the relationship with the cadavers (and later with your patients) that will sustain and inspire you. Thank you for such a thoughtful essay. Dr. Shapiro p.s. It was also a pleasure to talk with you a bit in the last anatomy elective session :-). Your comments were perceptive and humane.