

COMMENTS FINAL PROJECTS LITMED 2015

Dear Olivia, I thought your final project made a great contribution to your classmates (I'm only sorry I couldn't see it, because with the different fonts it sounded very Pinterest ☺). As we commented in class, the four years of medical school are a time of not only to be flooded by that fire-hose of information but also for a myriad of other non-stop inputs and challenges as well. Every day unbelievable amazing or horrible things happen to you. It is a period of great personal and professional change. Keeping track of all that is going on (and thus keeping perspective and hopefully some balance) can seem like just one more overwhelming thing. Boiling it down to a single sentence a day/week/month makes it manageable, yet still retains the capacity to capture important experiences. I hope your classmates consider engaging with this practice themselves; 4 years from now, they will be glad they did! It was a pleasure having you in class! Best, Dr. Shapiro

Shella, despite your protestations, I think you are a very good writer. I liked both your poems quite a bit. In the first one you read, the injunction to "dig deeper" was powerful because it works on multiple levels – the literal, of course, but also the idea of digging deeper into yourself and into the experience of dissection. I also liked that line about not having qualms because the cadaver had no qualms. It is important to remember that the donor wanted to be there for you, and thus your obligation became to make the most of the opportunity – of her body!

In "All Souls Day," you created a moving image of all those gathered "above," the spirits of the cadavers and others, reaching down to support and encourage you. The insertion of your grandfather among their number in the last line was poignant, and conveyed your awareness of these dead as people who were loved and cherished.

Thank you for your participation in class. I particularly appreciated your bringing your painting to our second session – that was brave of you, and I wish we'd been able to make that more of a norm. Your comments were always valuable as well. Much success in the remainder of the year, Dr. Shapiro

Jamie, I absolutely loved your poem – it was so self-aware, so in the moment. You took a small, insignificant incident – staying late for a patient in clinic after everyone else had left – to reflect on a profound issue in medicine: the balance between altruism and self-care. First, you recognized the normalcy and naturalness of your feelings – who wouldn't feel a bit resentful and put upon? Part of the poem shows you feeding those feelings – even the attending and the front office people head out. You are alone – which can be a very scary feeling in medicine. Yet, despite these feelings, you stayed for your patient, who obviously herself needed *not* to be alone and abandoned by the people supposed to help her. Dare I say, you behaved like a true *doctor* in that situation.

Later, after taking a well-deserved nap (self-care!), things looked brighter. You recognized that in medicine, "It's not all about me." Right – and in those difficult moments, you have to reach deep and muster the strength to return the focus to the patient. But *afterwards*, that nap (symbolically) becomes very important, because it is a paradox that the only way you can continue to be selfless is to occasionally attend to the self. When you extend compassion to yourself, you'll find it becomes easier to offer it to others, including your patients.

Thank you for being such an attentive and conscientious student, Jamie. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Isaure, thanks for your courage in helping us to understand your color boxes (reminded me of Mondrian, only more interesting 😊) more deeply by sharing something of who you are, how you grew up, and what is important to you. I was very touched by the image of the little girl on the transatlantic flights, soothing herself with long division (which btw I failed in 4th grade – is such a thing even possible?!). The fact that your art (which had a very palliating quality, perhaps because of your choice of colors, the orderliness of the squares, and the overall organization of the painting) also was grounded in mathematical operations and therefore had additional meaning was so interesting and thought-provoking. I thought Dr. Vasa's comment about synesthesia was spot-on. Numbers and colors became intertwined in a way that would never have occurred to me, yet made the whole work much more meaningful.

I was, however, amazed to learn that you do not consider yourself comfortable with words, as you use language precisely and beautifully in my opinion. I always looked forward not only to the subtlety of your thoughts but the manner in which you expressed them. It was a pleasure to have you in this class, and I always learned something when you shared your perspective. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Dear Priya, that was a very funny SP blog you shared! It also had a serious purpose – to remind us that medical students make mistakes, doctors make mistakes, and if you're lucky, most are survivable – for the patient AND the doctor. As a physician, you must learn everything you can from mistakes, which means examining them closely, rather than turning away from them in guilt and shame. Eventually, when you've done that, it means asking forgiveness of the patient (the SP you scratched with your nail or the patient you almost prescribed a drug to which they were allergic); and ultimately, it means forgiving yourself for not being a perfect person. This is okay – and when you figure this out, you will be a better doctor for it. Perhaps a meta-message of your project was the importance of laughter – when we can laugh at ourselves, or at the absurdity of the universe, we are probably still sane 😊

I hope you will find time to read The Empathy Exams. When I looked at my copy of the essay on being an SP, this quote jumped out: "Empathy means realizing no trauma has discrete edges. Trauma bleeds. Out of wounds and across boundaries....Empathy demands another kind of porousness in response." This speaks so precisely to one of the issues we wrestled with in class: how do we stay open to the suffering of others without being overwhelmed by that suffering? We didn't find the answer (I'm pretty sure there isn't one, or at least no simple one), but we had the conversation.

Thanks for choosing this elective, Priya, I very much enjoyed your presence. Dr. Shapiro

Dear X, I am honored and humbled that you chose to share something of this difficult aspect of your life journey with the class today. I think that took great courage, because (as I well know) people can look at you differently when you disclose a serious illness. On the other hand, I hope it was a liberating experience for you as well.

When I was diagnosed with a uterine sarcoma, I was afraid of how my colleagues would treat me if I told them. But after a bit, I realized this had become a big part of my identity (although by no means ALL my identity), and it was too much work to carry it all by myself! So I started talking to people and writing about it (if you ever look at back issues of Plexus, you'll see aspects of my diagnosis and treatment charted there), and it was actually a big relief.

Telling or not telling – and to whom, how much, under what circumstances etc. – is a complex issue that each person must determine for herself. Nevertheless, in my view you gave us something precious. What I very much hope is that your classmates realize that what you said is what is true for *all* of us – we all have our struggles, we are all carrying burdens that others know nothing about, we all have challenges we overcome and accept.

The way you tied together learning to draw hands from your father and how frightening it was when your own hands became impaired was very powerful. Your intriguing drawing of hands literally showed us their importance, to you and to all of us. This small but significant example helped us all glimpse something of how daily reality is impacted over and over again by illness.

I'm confident you will be a great doctor because you understand what it means to be a patient from the inside out. This will be a gift you give to every patient you care for and they will cherish you for it. It seems to me you have responded to your own question: "What would I do if...?" You are living your life, with commitment and resolve and beauty. I can't think of a better answer. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Hi Monica, thank you for sharing that very difficult-to-hear essay "Empty Pockets." It made me reflect on how the pain of loss and helplessness ripples out: the essay showed so strongly the grief of the family (the little daughter begging for "more medicine" for her mom); the resident who wrote the essay feeling so inadequate, helpless, and angry; and we listening to your reading feeling the reverberation of all that suffering.

As we discussed in class, somehow, as physicians, you must find the courage to be present for others at the worst of times; to know when that is all you have to offer; and to recognize that, in these moments, presence, while never enough, is still a great gift. This must be a very hard thing indeed – perhaps it helps to remember that patients are thankful that you have made this choice to serve others, even when you cannot always save them. It is true, as the author wrote, that you can only "say the words; but the family will live them." Nevertheless, someone must say those words so that the family can, indeed, live them.

Your choice of essay helped everyone in that room to face a moment no one wants to face. In effect, it was a "practice" for that inevitable moment in your future. It will not "prepare" you, but it will help you have the heart to not turn away.

Thanks so much for choosing to take this elective. You brought many valuable insights to class. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Dear Violeta, thank you for contributing a “death poem” to our discussion today. It presented a moment in a physician’s life that no one wants to live. Yet one day each of you will be standing in that intern’s shoes. You will have the responsibility, you must make the decisions, you will literally be holding a life in your hands. Despite your best efforts, will you be a “killer”? I think not, simply brave and imperfect human beings.

What struck me in that particular poem was how alone the intern seemed. Hopefully, wherever you eventually do your residency (that must seem so far away, but it will be here sooner than you think!), that will not be the case. I’ve sometimes heard experienced doctors counsel residents, “Don’t carry the coffin alone.” What they mean is that a patient’s death is always hard, but it is made easier when it is shared. That is the role of the team and of your mentors. As a young physician, you have a great weight of responsibility, but you should never carry it alone.

In effect, reading and sharing this poem was “practice” for that inevitable moment in all of your futures. It will not “prepare” you, but it will help each of you to take responsibility, be present, make the best choices and take the best actions you can. As Dr. Vasa counseled, show compassion toward yourself as you certainly will to your patients and their families. Remember you will do your best, and it will be enough.

Thank you for choosing to join this elective. I appreciated your attentive, thoughtful presence. Best,
Dr. Shapiro

Dear Axana, thank you for many things: for your very kind and thoughtful card; for your dedicated, perceptive, and vulnerable participation in the class; and for entrusting me with a piece of your life story. We received another piece of that story in class yesterday, when you shared the 19 quotations that lifted you up and kept you going – indeed, they were inspiring and authentic. I like quotations too – they are a quick way to remind us of whom we aspire to be (one of my favorites, “Wherever you are be the soul of that place” – Rumi).

Thank you also for sharing so movingly the story of the family doctor who was such an amazing role model. It must have been extraordinarily painful to witness his decline (many years ago, my best friend died of metastatic ovarian cancer, and I well remember the day she told me she could no longer remember how to use a telephone [old-fashioned land line] – it was devastating). Yet, as you concluded, he is dead but not gone. Indeed not only is his spirit within you, but by sharing his story, you were able to give each of us a little piece of his love and commitment to patients. I think your classmates will be better doctors for having heard his story.

Axana, let’s be sure to find time after break to get a cup of coffee. I can see what a caring and compassionate physician you’re going to make one day; I want to make sure do all we can to make that happen as smoothly and happily as possible. Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, wishing you and your family peace and joy, Dr. Shapiro

Dear Mackenzie, Dr. Berwick's commencement speech was such a great note to end on! Dr. Berwick has been an incredible advocate for humane and socially just medicine at the highest levels of government, and bringing his passionate and eloquent voice into our final conversation could not have been a better choice.

It was inspiring to hear his admonishment that the next generation of physicians (that's you all!) need to commit to being healers as well as doctors; and to figure out how to wield the power and privilege that comes with medicine wisely and well. Despite all the forces that may push you in rule-bound directions that often benefit corporate institutions rather than vulnerable patients, each of you can choose each day the kind of doctor you want to be. People so need you to make the right choices.

Thank you for participating in this elective, your comments always highlighted the perspective of those most vulnerable and marginalized. Best, Dr. Shapiro