

## COMMENTS LITMED FINAL PROJECTS 2012-13

There were many wonderful images in this poem, Avinash. Some I particularly liked were the idea of your “hands adorned” with the “vestiges” of another. Normally we think of adornment as beautiful jewelry or the like, but in this case you are referring to tissue, fat globules, smells. For me, this expressed with such originality the horror and beauty we discussed in class. I also very much liked the metaphor of the thread – of course, it has kind of a surgical connotation of binding (future surgeon, anyone?), but also emphasizes that sense of connectedness, how medical students are bound to cadavers, how patients are bound to doctors and vice-versa, how all of humanity is bound together. You also explored in a moving way the patient’s sacrifice, your gratitude, and the knowledge you hope results to help you on your journey. Thank you for this contribution, for your TED talks, and for your many valuable contributions to our discussions. I wish you all the best as the year continues. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Dear Gabby and Priscilla, I loved your first person narrative, and I saw many appreciative nods around the room as you were reading it. The way you read it together made it clear that these were universal experiences that all medical students share. You documented beautifully the first stages of what will be a long, and hopefully rewarding journey – the white coat ceremony, the first exam, the standardized patient interview, anatomy lab – so many firsts! Each one you captured with exquisite detail and understanding of its significance. By highlighting each, you allowed yourselves and your classmates to savor its significance. I hope you will continue to reflect on each milestone along the way, and never lose sight of your vision of doctoring. You were both a pleasure to have in this class, and I wish you all the best in your future training. Dr. Shapiro

Dear X, thank you for sharing with me the death of your father and how his loss motivated you to become a physician. Your poems are very touching. I was especially moved by the “lesson” you extracted at such a tender age from death: forgiveness, not anger. This shows a wisdom beyond your years, it is something some people never learn; and as you will see as you progress through your clinical training, it has plenty of application in medicine as in life.

It is very hard to lose a parent so young. The voice in these poems is surprisingly mature and reflective for a 12 year old. I wonder what it was like to revisit them after so many years. I hope you felt affection and compassion for that fatherless little boy, as well as admiration for the way he stepped forward trying to understand and accept the loss of his father, while affirming what an important presence he’d been in his life. In my experience, people who sadly have suffered significant losses of their own make for exceptionally compassionate and sensitive physicians. I think your father would be proud that you have chosen to make your life one of service to others. Wishing you all the best this year and in the future, Dr. Shapiro

Hi Jessica, just wanted to thank you again for such an interesting project. As I mentioned, physicians who become patients often express shock and surprise about what it’s like to be on the other side; and they make changes in their doctoring as a result. I was especially

struck by the physician with back pain who thought (“irrationally” in his own word) that he had cancer, and his realizing that the “irrational” fears and doubts of patients actually made a lot of sense and were very understandable. Other insights were also notable, such as how hard it is to be in the hospital and how much patients value encouragement. Yet in another sense, these all seem so... obvious. Do doctors really have to become ill themselves before they understand these things? I think it is partly the fault of medical education itself, that tends to separate doctors and patients into two distinct categories seemingly with so little in common (their humanity?!) How I wish it was possible for physicians to cross this bridge into empathy for patients without having to go to death’s door to do so! That is really the whole point of classes such as literature and medicine, to move closer to patients’ suffering and perspective, so the patient is no longer seen as the other.

Please remember the (limited!) resources of the Program in Medical Humanities if you ever want to extend this project as a research study. I think you would discover many valuable insights.

I’ve said it so many times, but you really were a wonderful presence in class. I know you have a bright future ahead of you – in medicine and in life – and I wish you much success.  
Best, Dr. Shapiro

Nabila, what a wonderful project you created! First the metaphor of the evolving flower was truly creative. It made me think of all you students as lovely flowers, which was a very sweet (sorry for the pun) image ☺ Second, it said that, since all flowers are beautiful in their own way, at every step of their training medical students are also beautiful and should be cherished. Third, it suggested that the process of transformation from one thing to another (simple daisy to complex rose) can be painful, which is also true.

On another note, thanks for your many positive comments about the class, they meant a great deal to me. And... I’m very happy that insights from the class proved to be helpful with your m-i-l. I can’t imagine a better tribute ☺. Many good wishes for this year and into the future. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Dear Ziwei, thank you for contributing the lovely and clever Morning/Noon/Evening poem. It was a wonderful idea (perhaps anatomy-inspired?) to have the “body” passing through the cycle of the day. I thought the theme of leaving the “magic” behind was poignant, and it was quite interesting the discussion it generated. It was a pleasure to have you in class, and I hope that the class met your needs. Much good luck in the future. Dr. Shapiro

Vivian, thank you for taking the risk to write such an authentic, compelling, and truthful essay. What a great metaphor you selected – from the knight of Camelot setting out to change the world, to the humble mule, struggling along in the mud, perhaps not making much of a difference at all. I’m also so glad you addressed the very challenging issue of sacrifice. There is a lot of sacrifice required in medicine, and learning how to find that

necessary balance between altruism and self-care is absolutely critical to your long-term surviving and thriving. Fortunately, there is a lot more awareness of this issue than 20 or 30 years ago, but it is still difficult to sort out, and the best way is to reflect on it and talk about it with peers and mentors. You trailblazed with this project, Vivian. I'm proud of you. And don't forget, Don Quixote rode a mule, but his idealism convinced him it was a horse ☺ Wishing you the best of luck now and as you proceed through your training, Dr. Shapiro

Dear Asim, thank you for your poetic reflection on anatomy. It was remarkably well-written, and expressed in restrained but powerful language the strong emotions connected with dissection. In the end, the strongest emotion was gratitude. It was a pleasure to have you in class, and each time we got together I was happy you'd decided to join the class. Your remarks were always intelligent, penetrating, and sensitive. I know you will make an outstanding physician. Good luck on the path. Dr. Shapiro

Alex, your reflections on the Physical Exam were both funny (I loved the line that the standardized patient *being paid* let you to "grope" her body in your clumsy attempts at examination only made the whole experience worse ☺) and profound. Indeed, your nonrhyming poem (still definitely a poem) captured well the strange intimacy of medicine: you have permission for an incredible close, personal contact with another human being that in other circumstances would never be permitted. It is one of the great privileges of medicine, and all too easily it becomes an expectation, a right. There were so many skillfully observed insights – the white "cape," reminiscent of superheroes, that is only long enough to make *you* sweat, not anybody else; the fact that you don't realize your SP is referring to *you* when he says "doc." And yet, you *hear* a sound through your stethoscope and you *know* what it means. Your journey has begun, you have started to acquire the expert knowledge that sets you apart as a physician. The last line is just perfect - indeed, *this is* how it all starts, and where it ends is barely a glimmer in your eye ☺. Alex, you were a wonderful part of the litmed class this year. Your comments in class were thoughtful, insightful, and often surprised me. I wish you the very best now and in the future.

Hi Vivian, what a creative idea you pursued in your final project. The overriding theme, I think, was remembering the patient as a person. A person, somebody's mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, friend, lover is "attached" (as you put it ☺) to a diagnosis and disease. People struggling with illness and medical conditions are all around us, and we often don't know it. Your project was a wonderful way of concretizing this reality, and I hope your fellow students make similar lists of their own. Thank you for your participation in this class, I enjoyed getting to know you a bit. I wish you much success this year and in the future. Best, Dr. Shapiro