

CREATIVE PROJECTS LITERATURE AND MEDICINE ELECTIVE 2010

Dear Suzi, you are really a strong writer! Your poems were great. What a perfect metaphor you landed on to capture the never-ending aspect of medical school (well, medicine... well, life!). A Buddhist friend of mine wrote a book called "After the Ecstasy, the Laundry," to remind practitioners that it's all very well to have ecstatic experiences, but what's most important is how you live your daily life (i.e., do the laundry). Good point, but I think we should equally say, "After the laundry, the ecstasy!" Life should not be all about laundry, simply one task after another. I think we all long to do "laundry naked" (this is going to become part of my ongoing vocabulary!), but probably the better solution is to get used to walking around in dirty clothes and LOVING IT! :-).

I loved your longer poem as well, because it was so honest. I had this image of you sitting at your desk late at night and saying, "Yup, I did all these things, the good the bad and the ugly... and it's okay." This quality of a life in balance that the poem conveyed so well struck me as very precious – that you could look clearly at your life, not judge it, but just *see* it, and be comfortable with that.

These are both very profound reflections. I hope you consider sending them to Plexus next year, to inspire and encourage the next crop of first years.

It was a pleasure having you in class, and getting to know you a bit this year. Best of luck as your training proceeds, Dr. Shapiro

Jackie, thank you for sharing your blog. You are a really good writer, you know how to find the humor – even the absurdity – in the seemingly mundane aspects of life (you are probably way too young to know who Erma Bombeck is, but google her. I detect a similarity, and she would have loved blogging!). Your riff on studying was hilarious – and unfortunately, to judge by the nodding heads of your peers, all too accurate. I also thought you did a great job of exploring questions of identity through the shifts in your igoogle and gmail themes. These were adorable, but in my view profound. Medical school does change you, and you need to figure out who this new person is and how much you like her (could you be an ass-kicking ninja who occasionally cuddles farm animals? :-)).

I read your other blog entries as well since you turned them in. As a "superficial" :-)) practitioner of old lady yoga, I loved your reflections on anatomy and yoga. I am sure you know that Final Relaxation, shavasna, actually means Corpse Pose. The connections just keep on comin' :-)). Your reflections on the potential for mutation into the dreaded a**hole doctor was also spot-on (loved! the cartoon). You showed great self-awareness in this insight. Sadly, although most of us do not have the capacity to be a**hole doctors, all of us have the potential to be a**hole people. It's just that the elevated status of physicianhood seems to give some people a sense that they can let out their inner a**hole at the drop of a hat! Finally, you made some adorable anthropological observations about the behavior of alumnae medicus in large lecture halls. From the other side of the

podium, I must admit the value of “Question!” loudly hollered out, since I routinely call on people for their illuminating thoughts to discover they are just... stretching.

All in all, it’s a wonderful blog, and I hope you get to write in it at least 4 times next year :-). Best wishes in CF II (I think there *is* a lecture on HNTBAA :-). Best, Dr. Shapiro p.s. I am pretty sure that I have used the word a**hole more often in this email than I have in the entire rest of my career :-).

Lisa, I’m glad you took a risk with a little journaling. I’m not a big journaler myself (takes way too much discipline), but I really think that this year and the three following are so momentous in students’ lives that occasionally taking time out to just jot down a few of the memorable moments, just as you’ve done here. I really liked the “meta-theme” of gratitude that ran through all these “highlights.” Medical school – and physicianhood – are not easy, but they do have many rewards, much to be thankful. Like journaling, gratitude is a practice. Of course, sometimes it comes naturally, but sometimes we have to make sure we don’t overlook it. I also relished the eager anticipation with which you prepare for what lies ahead. It sounds indeed that you are following your chosen path. Best of luck next week, next year, and beyond. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Aliyah, I liked your anatomy poem; and I loved this poem. You have the soul of a poet. Like other true poets before you, you are not afraid to work within the craft of the medium in order to find what you are trying to express. This poem is poignant and courageous. It confronts an aspect of life that is so hard – its unpredictability, uncertainty, its instability and groundlessness – and says in effect, go deeper, go forward, never abandon the search for meaning. This is a gem. Thank you for offering to us. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Hi Tiffany. Thanks for such a wonderful project. (I don’t know Victor, but I think you’ve found a great collaborator!). You chose a superb metaphor – funny, yet “fitting” (sorry, couldn’t help it); and then skillfully worked within it. A good metaphor brings together and compares two disparate things, in a way that illuminates the object of focus and stimulates new insights and understandings. (Great touch, by the way, to pick up on the unique *smell* of both environments). This metaphor worked particularly well because it acknowledges the “squeezing and shoving” that go into becoming a doctor. And of course the purpose of the shoehorn, even though it puts you through some discomfort, is to “ease” the foot in as gently as possible. I also loved the phrase “The shoes of a physician are large...” It is a tribute to the generations of physicians who have come before you, a humble recognition of your place in a long and distinguished chain of healers. I too have absolutely no doubt that the shoes will fit “just right.” It was a real privilege to get to know you this year, and I wish you much luck as you go forward. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Shawna, thank you for contributing such a moving acknowledgment of the crucial role your uncle has played – and continues to play – in your life. I really liked the format you chose – your questions, doubts, and emotions, followed by your uncle’s calm, pithy, and reassuring wisdom. I had never heard this quote of Michelangelo’s, but it is indeed

inspiring (I googled it, and discovered he was supposed to have written it when he was 87, which makes it even more remarkable). Since physicians must be committed to lifelong learning, these are wise words to guide you. As you already know, you are fortunate to have someone like your uncle in your life. But your uncle is also lucky – to have someone with whom he can relive the incredible journey toward physicianhood, and who is eager to absorb the lessons he learned along the way. Thanks for sharing your uncle with us today! Best, Dr. Shapiro

Hi Michael, what a wonderful reflection on that by-now trite med school application question: “Why...etc.”. Sometimes the less we know, the more certain we are. How easy to answer “I want to be a doctor because...” when you barely have a clue about what that really means. Harder when you are plunged weekly into a rapidly disintegrating cadaver, molecular biology, immunology, histology, physiology. And once you matriculate in medical school, in a way the question no longer seems relevant. You’ve made it. But of course the “end” is really the beginning. I suspect that every time you revisit this question (with or without Tommy’s ironic inflection :-)) you will struggle a bit with the answer. And to me, that’s a good thing. Because I also think that the answer you do find will be richer, deeper, and more meaningful. As you say in your poem, it becomes less about abstractly crafting a response (that hopefully will impress an admissions committee – or at least your aunts and uncles!), and more about living and encountering an answer that “transcends words.” You are right – this profession that is so rooted in the body is something that you not so much intellectualize as metabolize (“wrapped itself around my being”), something that as you phrase it so eloquently “fulfills the soul.” Understanding this will make shoveling the coal endurable – even at times a joy. Very strong work. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Tommy, thank you for your appreciative words, they really mean a lot. I’m thrilled to hear you are enrolled in the writing workshop at UCLA. You are very talented, and when you have a gift, you should use it :-). I am biased, but I think the ability to tell – and to understand – a good story goes hand in hand with good doctoring. So to me, you are simply enhancing your medical training.

You delivered a great performance in class. Unfortunately, there are doctors out there like Dr. Grimes (aptly named). I adored the conceit of a “doctor’s brain” – very clever, very funny, and sometimes truer than we’d like to think. You know, as we discussed, right now I think (to use literary theory terms) there is a lot of ongoing “contestation” about the project of medicine. The message from Dr. Grimes belongs to what is still probably the dominant discourse in medicine. But it is by no means the only message – and certainly many would argue that it is far from the right message. So all those little counternarratives in italics? – they matter, you have a right to give voice to them, you can *be* that doctor who is a healer, whose creativity is expressed in every patient interaction (btw, loved that line about chiropractic :-)). Don’t doubt that. Being able to think outside the box, to see things from more than one perspective (which I consider to be creativity) are crucial to clinical practice. You went on to nail the comfort “checklist” (still want a copy); and the proposition that doctors “don’t have emotional problems” (Dr. Grimes should look at the literature that documents high rates of substance abuse, divorce,

depression, suicide, and burn-out in physicians). In a way, it's sad that you have to defend the humanity of the physician – but there it is. However, for every instance where you have to assert that being a human being is not incompatible with being a doctor, you will find people – both within medicine (i.e., other doctors and medical students) and outside of medicine (i.e., patients and family members) – who will cheer you on. Be courageous. Remember Gandhi? Be the doctor you want.

Tommy, please do keep in touch next year. I want to know how your writing – and you – progress! Best, Dr. Shapiro

Hi Steph. Thank you for entrusting your thoughts about your father to the class. I think everyone was moved, both by your personal situation; and by the realization that the clinical cases so objectively and unemotionally addressed in lectures are real people with real families. As I mentioned, I have heard similar experiences from other students over the years – once, awfully, a student learning an unfavorable prognosis for a rare disease her mother had. By having the courage to give voice to your own experience, you helped us all to remember the humanity - and therefore the suffering – that inevitably is encountered in medicine. You also made us aware that physicians too have their own humanity; they too suffer. In one sense of course, this is very hard. But in another sense, it is what connects patients and doctors. Suffering that is shared is easier to bear.

Although of lesser importance, I do want to say how well-written I found your poem to be. The concluding lines were painfully beautiful – true art. They made me weep when I reread them.

Steph, I'm glad we will have a chance to work together this summer. I know your project will be original, perceptive, and unexpected. All the best, Dr. Shapiro

Dear Anne, thank you for sending me your project. The haiku were lovely. To me, they say something very profound about the practice of medicine. It is all about recognizing that despite many, many differences, all of us – patients, doctors, med students, nurses, family – really are in this (life?) together, and we all desperately need each other to survive and to succeed.

It was wonderful to hear about the way that anatomy has empowered you toward medicine. It sounds like it has been like a key unlocking the door – to Gawande and all his book represents: the “kingdom” of medicine. You are right – ignorance is rarely bliss (keep that in mind for your future patients); and knowledge is indeed power. You will accrue power every year... use it wisely.

Anne, it has been a true pleasure to get to know you this year. You are smart, perceptive, curious, and caring. You are going to make a great doctor one day. Good luck for the remainder of this year and beyond, Dr. Shapiro

Dear Nicole, thank you for such nice words. It is very rewarding to know that students have learned something and gotten something out of the class, since I definitely do! :-)

I really liked your project, both when you read it in class, and on revisiting. It was quite funny – and even better, it addressed a crucial issue in doctoring: i.e., it is never exactly like the book! Your poem not only recognized this reality, but also pointed out that when the patient doesn't conform to the doctor's expectations, it is surprisingly easy to blame... the patient! Somehow the patient must be wrong! (It is contemporary medicine's unfortunate tendency to have more confidence in the expert text than in the actual person). You satirized this position very well, so both made us laugh and hit home an important lesson that will extend far beyond this year. I also appreciated the transformation you personally underwent from exasperation to empathy and understanding. "Tell me." These simple words will do so much to make a patient feel seen and heard; and to convey sincere caring. And you can always do exactly what you describe here – when you see yourself going down a wrong path, you can recalibrate and reconnect with what is most important: your patient.

I wish you all success next year and beyond. Best, Dr. Shapiro