

LITERATURE AND MEDICINE 2016 FINAL PROJECT COMMENTS

Melinda Schneider

Dear Melinda, I just wanted to reinforce what was said in class today. You displayed unusual courage in sharing this piece of your story, and in so doing gave all of us listening a great gift. Thank you for taking the risk to be vulnerable and authentic. I am so terribly sorry that you experienced this abuse, but it is part of who you are and you must find a place for it in your life (as you obviously have done and continue to do). Entrusting your secret to others with care and thoughtfulness, as you did, is a way of owning this secret at a deeper level. So, done wisely, it can be healing for the teller. It is certainly profoundly moving for the listener. You helped us understand a bit better and on a visceral level what abuse is like, how controlling, imprisoning, and hurtful, and how hard healing can be. The refrain of your essay “No more!” was both heartbreaking and uplifting. Melinda, we are all wounded healers, doctors and patients alike. As Leonard Cohen sang in Anthem, it is through the cracks that the light gets in – and, I would add, shines out. Wishing you all good things, Dr. Shapiro

Anh Le

Dear Anh, Thank you for your fabulous skit. It was funny, true to life, and very insightful about the performative, artificial aspect of certain approaches to clinical training. I was especially impressed with the way you used your SP’s drinking issues as a prompt to consider your own drinking. This blurring of the line between “physician/med student” and “patient” is very valuable because it reminds us we are all vulnerable, we all struggle, we all suffer. The patient’s drinking problem is not a “patient” problem, it is a human problem. It was a pleasure to have you in class, I appreciated your self-awareness and insight. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Anders Waalen

Anders, I loved your iPad sketch. As I mentioned in class, the lines from Wordsworth’s poem about daffodils was particularly meaningful to me. What touched me deeply was the image of your patient reciting poems (or fragments of poems) to you; and you tracking them down, memorizing them in turn, and reciting them back to her. It showed great person-centered sensitivity. You figured out how to continue to treat your patient with dignity and to maintain connection with her. It was a beautiful sharing, and I think everyone in the room was moved both by your project and by the depth of your feeling for this patient. Your comments in class were always interesting and perceptive, and it was a pleasure to get to know you a bit. All the best, Dr. Shapiro

Leesa Li

Leesa, you created a beautiful poem, so thoughtful and insightful. I resonated to the wonderful lines about every life having an origin, an action, a source of innervation, and an ending – just like our bones. This contained a profound awareness – it was a sort of a memento mori, a reminder of death so that we might more fully appreciate our lives. You showed great craft as well when you concluded “These will be my bones,” recognizing that only time and luck separates you from the cadaver you are dissecting. It was a sobering awareness that, at least to me, also conveyed a moving solidarity with the dead. A truly exquisite meditation. Thank you for choosing this elective, Leesa. It was a pleasure to have you in class. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Sasha Herbst de Cortina

Dear Sasha, you were just terrific in the presentation of your final project. As I mentioned in class, I expected you to flee at the first sign of tears, embarrassed by this sign of “weakness.” Instead, you owned your emotions and stayed present, with us and with ourselves. It sent such a powerful message about how people can feel deeply and yet carry on with what they need to be doing. I was impressed by your courage and your commitment to us.

Your story about crying about death when you watched the latest Star Wars movie was both funny and touching. It is often surprising what serves to trigger our strong emotions. Usually it is the case that we are just waiting for a safe, unstressed situation where we can release without fear of negative repercussion. As someone who has wrestled (and continues to do so) with the fear of death, the apparent “wrongness” of losing those we love and being lost to them (a beautiful poem by Ted Rosenthal is titled “How Can I Not Be Among You?”), I respect your anguish and feel it makes great sense. I’ve often thought that it is a great deal to expect that medical students will somehow, without much if any guidance, just figure out how to absorb the sudden onslaught of suffering, pain, anguish, and death that confronts them on a daily basis in the course of their training. It deserves some thought and some tears.

By the way, BJ Miller is a great role model to have identified. If you haven’t watched his Ted talk, I recommend it:

https://www.ted.com/talks/bj_miller_what_really_matters_at_the_end_of_life

I don’t think it is possible to find any final answers or come to perfect resolution, but I think you can discover ways of thinking and being with illness, suffering, disability, and death that bring some acceptance and even peace (some of the time!). Wishing you well on your journey, Dr. Shapiro

Nazin Sedehi

Dear Nazin, your poem was hilarious! You are a very witty writer. I loved the contrast between the fake day and the real day. We all live in that “real day,” and while it’s great to aspire to greater organization and discipline and perfection, we might as well embrace those days because we’re living them. I felt your poem showed a very healthy self-acceptance while poking a little good-natured fun at yourself.

Thank you for sharing the Marc Straus poem. It is one of my favorites. It reminds us that, despite all the knowledge stuffed in to your doctor brains, the most important questions patients will ask you can never be answered by facts and formulas and statistics; and often cannot be answered at all. In those cases, physicians must be humble and rely on “angels” to offer solace.

Nazin, I’m so happy to be working with you as medical humanities rep. I look forward to a year of rich collaboration. All best, Dr. Shapiro

Thalia Nguyen

Dear Thalia, thank you for sharing the wonderful people who have supported and loved you and helped you become the person you are – your high school friends, your father, your beautiful grandfather. It’s true – their smiles are your smile. It was very moving to think that it was the time caring for your father that inspired your toward medicine. I suspect that every time you care for a patient, you will remember that that person is someone else’s father (or mother, or brother, or sister, or mother, or daughter, or son) and the compassion and love you felt for your dad will be manifest in some form toward that patient. As for your grandfather, you could see in his beaming face that he had a zest for life and a great pride in his family. You have an opportunity to carry his spirit into your future, and it seems to me that is exactly what you are doing. I’m very glad you chose to participate in the patient/doctor stories electives, and I hope we will continue to work together on the art exhibit and other projects. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Celia Cheung

Dear Celia, you are an excellent writer with a critical mind and an open heart. . Your “Reflections to a Future Self” was insightful and thought-provoking. Indeed, medicine is a new country that is both eye-opening and disturbing. As you wrote, it is rooted in respect for the patient, and a prevailing awareness of the privilege of being the recipient of the stories, hopes, and fears of suffering others.

Your meditations on “never letting knowledge hamper problem-solving” were quite profound. You might take a look at a book by Jerome Groopman How Doctors Think, which examines how certain algorithmic cognitive patterns (learned during training) sometimes

lead to missed or wrong diagnoses and negative outcomes. Knowledge of course is essential but it creates blind spots of its own. Medicine can force patients into inappropriate categories out of its fundamental need for classification. Your awareness of this phenomenon was quite impressive. As we discussed, with the rise of personalized medicine (although this is still at the genomic, as opposed to the human, medicine), it is possible that we will see nuances developing in this sort of reductive thinking. One can only hope.

Thank you for all the help you've given to the MH Symposium and your stepping forward to assist with the Plexus opening at Grunigen Library. I really appreciate your enthusiasm for the arts, and your recognition of how they can illuminate the practice of medicine. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Olivia Marik-Reis

Dear Olivia, thank you for renewing our awareness of the humanity of the anatomy donors. Nail polish is such a small thing, yet it says so much. I think there is a craving to know something about the particularities of people whose last act was an almost unimaginable gift. Yet for their protection – and yours – you learn almost nothing about them – except their bodies. In the process of dismantling their bodies, you come to know them more intimately than did even the donors themselves. Done properly, this form of knowing is also a connection, a way of keeping alive something of the generosity and hopefulness embedded in these donations.

Olivia, it was so rewarding to have you in class. Your contributions about performance were always insightful and illuminating. I suspect that your background in theater will add a rich dimension to the way you understand clinical interactions. I wish you all success as your medical journey unfolds. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Katie Bennett

Dear Katie, I am sorrier than I can say that your dear friend is dealing with a very difficult cancer diagnosis, and that her family and you must walk such a painful path with her. But thank God you have the strength to do this. It is very, very hard indeed to be the patient facing suffering and likely death. Sometimes we forget the anguish of the family and friends who stand in solidarity yet cannot change the course of events. Yet I believe that “standing together” is one of the most important things we can do for each other. It takes grace and it takes grit, but it is how we affirm our humanity. Life sometimes just makes no sense and cannot be explained. In these situations, perhaps the only thing that does make sense is love.

As I mentioned in class, I'm glad that you and your friend have the kind of relationship that has remained mutual despite her illness. She has not devolved into the passive recipient of

care and concern; she also is an active participant in life, letting you know through her gift of art just how much you mean to her. I hope seeing yourself through her eyes will give you the courage to continue this journey; and to recognize that this journey is a part of medicine as well. Thank you for allowing us to be a part of it as well, even if only for a moment. Wishing you and your friend and her family resilience and peace, Dr. Shapiro