

“Storytelling as a Vehicle of Healing”: Johanna Shapiro, PhD, Professor, Psychologist, Poet,
Medical Humanities Scholar

Jo Marie Reilly, M.D., MPH, FAAFP

Clinical Professor of Family Medicine
Keck School of Medicine of USC

1975 Zonal Ave, KAM B-30
Los Angeles CA 90033
Phone: (323) 442-2439

Email: jmreilly@usc.edu

Word Count 1733 (excluding references):

Key words: Shapiro: Medical Humanities Scholar

Abstract:

This commentary reflects the professional life story of a respected editor, poet and champion of medical humanities, Johanna Shapiro. A psychologist by training, Johanna's work in medical humanities is well known and respected by health professionals in multiple venues. It is within family medicine that Johanna found her professional home; She has shared the value of storytelling as a vehicle of healing to help health professional at all levels of training and patients connect to their illness and wellness. This commentary offers a tribute to Johanna's professional life and her contributions to family and narrative medicine.

Quiet friend who has come so far,
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.
Let this darkness be a bell tower
and you the bell. As you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.
Move back and forth into the change.
What is it like, such intensity of pain?
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night,
be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
the meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,
say to the silent earth: I flow.
To the rushing water, speak: I am.

Sonnets to Orpheus II, 29, Rilke (2010).

In *Sonnets to Orpheus II*, the great lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke enjoins us to think of darkness as a bell tower, and ourselves as the bell. It is an inspiring and hopeful image. Over a long career, Dr. Johanna Shapiro, a professor from the Department of Family Medicine, University of California, Irvine, has been one of those bells. She has been a tireless advocate for medical education to value the humanities as much as the basic sciences; and insistent that training of physicians should pay as much attention to sustaining compassion and kindness as to transmitting biomedical knowledge and skills. Johanna is a respected and gifted teacher, poet, and editor. She has spent decades championing medical humanities as a necessary discipline within the data and scientifically driven medical world. She has called us to the art of medicine, reminding health care professionals both of the value of their role in patient relationships and to the impact of illness on patients' lives. As in Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Let this darkness be a bell tower," Shapiro's work bears witness to those in society who struggle with illness and need to be reconnected to their souls, to find purpose in their darkness, and meaning in their journeys.

Johanna's connection to writing is deep within her genetic make-up, something she always came back to during her life as it refreshed, renewed and connected her to herself. She grew up in a family of writers and teachers. Her father wrote comedy for radio and tv and he and her mother wrote novels together. She was exposed as a child to the rich world of language, metaphor, and rhythm in written word and expression. She learned the value and importance of words from an early age, and how powerfully their specific pairing and ordering speak to a larger world. While others grow up afraid of poetry and writing, Shapiro's gentle inculcation with written language as a child set her on a course that would later define much of her career and passion. She wrote her first poem and "novel" when she was seven and then left her writing for years. She came back to it in college as an English major, and wrote and won a French essay contest as an undergraduate college student, describing the experience as "folding her back into her earlier life

and reconnecting...Turning (me) back in a Jungian way to an ‘unfulfilled portion of (my)self’ that (I) abandoned but value(d) and tried to reclaim” (Shapiro, 2019).

While devoting over 15 years to the traditional practice of psychology as a behavioral scientist, she felt disillusioned with this work. It was her own bout with illness and a retinal detachment that reunited her with poetry and its ability to redefine “the mystery at the crossroads of (her) senses, and the meaning discovered” (Rilke, 2010). Gifted with a book of Emily Dickinson poetry, it was its verse and its ability to capture the experience of illness and suffering that spoke to her soul and gave her comfort and the resilience to heal. Dickinson (1999), also having suffered eye disease, wrote:

“Hope is the thing with feathers-
That perches in the soul-
And sings the tune without words-
And never stops- at all”.... (Dickinson, 1999).

Johanna’s personal experience with illness and the profound impact Dickinson’s poetry had in her healing, was a sentinel event that birthed her subsequent twenty-year career in literary medicine.

Johanna received tentative support from her UC Irvine family medicine department to begin a literature and medicine class and that connected patient and doctor stories to student learning. This course began a decisive shift in her professional journey away from a professor of theoretical psychology to instead “using psychology as an applied science with the arts as a different way to get at medicine” (Shapiro, 2019). “Medicine is so controlled by the electronic medical records and the boxes you click now. While having patients care systemized and standardized is important, we can’t lose our connections with our patients. The arts allow for the latter” (Shapiro, 2019).

It is Johanna’s work defining and championing medical humanities and arts that so personify the tremendous footprint that she will leave in her retirement. “I didn’t birth medical humanities, but I caught it in its adolescence and enhanced it” (Shapiro, 2019). UC Irvine had no medical humanities program, but she used the inter-professional university team and the family medicine department as a platform to “bring a glimmer to medical humanities” (Shapiro, 2019). She worked with multiple committees who valued arts and literature and gave her the blessing and permission to work with students, residents, faculty and patients to build a vibrant narrative medicine program at her university. Through multiple editorial opportunities, grants and inter-professional work, she became a national voice for the connection between illness and medical humanities as a source of healing and wellness. Johanna has been a “quiet” champion behind the scenes - helping her colleagues see narrative work as a respected and necessary discipline, one that defines compassion and helps re-connect the health care professional to the patient Her body of work expounds on medical humanities “as an instance of a seamless connection between the sciences and the arts” as well as “the best exemplars of the promise and necessity of crossing the chasms between ways of knowing toward new and powerful ways of being and healing.” (Charon, 2006).

As a humanities educator and champion, Johanna has trained and mentored, countless health professionals, both physicians and behavioral scientists alike, at the community, state and national level through her poetry, humanities editorial work, courses, conferences and presentations. Her teaching work has empowered others through astute insights into the healing power of the medical humanities. She has helped learners understand that poetry opens new dimensions of understanding and connection. Johanna encourages health professionals at all levels of training to explore relationships and emotional expression in patients and families with alternative points of view using crafted verse as a healing art for patients and ourselves. She has challenged her colleagues, her students, residents, faculty, her department and university to look deep into the stories of patients and how storytelling offers a vehicle for healing. Storytelling and writing “help doctors (and all health professionals) be attuned to their inner life, to the inner life of patients and families, and to the intersubjective dance between them” (Stein, 2013).

Johanna’s work challenges us to rethink how we educate health care professionals, particularly physicians. In medical education there is a “dichotomy between what is essential in medicine and what is nice. [What we need instead is “a shift in balance so a physician [is] more of a renaissance person that utilizes both the science and the art” (Shapiro, 2019). She fantasizes about a medical education system where arts and literature are not a “delightful filler” (Shapiro, 2019) but instead deeply integrated into medical education in a comprehensive way. She imagines a world where in the “day-to-day of a physician’s practice, they (physicians) use improvisational skills at least as often as they apply their anatomical knowledge” (Shapiro, 2019). She also reminds us that “literature is an antidote to burnout and increases our compassion. Literature and arts re-inspire us, counteract burnout, help us understand other’s perspectives, engender greater empathy, let us hear other’s voices that we can’t always hear and allows us to focus on social justice” (Shapiro, 2019).

In her book, *The Inner World of Medical Students: Listening to Their Voices In Poetry* (2009), Shapiro describes the power which poetry has to keep students connected to the humanity which drew them to medicine. She observes that medical training “attempts to order the world by relying on knowledge that can be obtained by reductionism, objectivity, and essentialism, as well as logical, rational thinking, and relationships that can be controlled by hierarchy, authority, and power. This leads to models of understanding and relationships that are excessively formulaic, rule-bound, and lacking in human connection.” As poetry influenced her own life as a source for healing with her illnesses, she has used and role modeled it for students, patients and all health professionals, to help connect them to their own health and wellness journeys. “I have had the good fortune in my work to see that both medicine and writing, with a little luck and a little grace, can save and can heal” (Shapiro, 2019). She reflects on her own journey:

“Am I a better person
When I write?
Not always, but sometimes
In that moment when I write
I discover
A world in which I am not afraid
A world that still belongs to me.”

“Poetry connects reader and writer- ambiguity in language which is unprecise- allows one flexibility, hope, interpretation in a biomedical world that does not often offer that openness, escape, and freedom of expression or interpretation” (Shapiro, 2003).

Johanna’s personal and professional work with poetry and students have also called her to a national stage as the arts and literature editor for multiple family medicine journals, including *Family Systems and Health (FSH)*. In the latter, she has done transcendent and transformative work connecting, collecting, and honing narrative work - shaping the poetry of physicians, patients, students and psychologists, guiding their work to publication. In her 15 years as editor/co-editor of the FSH narrative medicine section, she has worked with three different editors-in-chief, written commentaries on poems, and seen the growth of the arts and literature section, Sharing our Stories which now publishes poetry, 55 word stories, narrative, and haiku. She brings a gracious, gentle editorial wisdom, keen eye, judicious words, and an astute and spot-on analysis of medical humanities and its nuances. Her work calls us to consider medical storytelling as a powerful tool, allowing us to transcend the boundaries of medicine and speak to the depths of humanity, illness and wellness.

Johanna, with her compassion as poet, medical humanities advocate, teacher and scholar, reminds us that the gift and blessing of narrative medicine is its ability to honor and bear witness to ourselves, our families, our patients, teachers and colleagues and “everyone who is born (and) holds dual citizenship in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick” (Sontag, 1978) because we are all worthy.

References

Let This Darkness Be a Bell Tower, Rainer Maria Rilke.

The Sonnets to Orpheus, 11, 29.

Translated by Robert Temple, copyright 2020.

<https://www.sonnetstoorpheus.com>

Shapiro, JF, PHD. Personal Communication. December, 2019.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers (314)

Franklin, RW, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Harvard University Press, 1999.

Charon, Rita. *Narrative Medicine: Honoring Stories of Illness*. Oxford University Press, NY, 2006.

Stein, FH, PhD. “Why I write: Reflections from 40 years of Clinical Teaching and Writing. *Fam Med* 2013;45(1)46-7.

The Inner World of Medical Students: Listening to Their Voices In Poetry. Shapiro, PhD
CRC Press; 1 edition. April 25, 2009.

“My World”, Johanna Shapiro, PhD, 2011.

<https://Johannashapiro.org/medical-humanities-arts-presentations>

Shapiro J, Rucker, L. CA Poetry Make Better Doctors? Teaching the humanities and arts to medical students and residents at the University of California, Irvine, College of Medicine.

Acad Med. 2003 Oct;78(10):953-7

Susan Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor.*

Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1978.