

The great William Osler used the Latin term *aequanimitas* to describe the quality he valued most in the ideal physician. Almost 100 years later, the internist and poet Jack Coulehan speculated that, in reducing *aequanimitas* to the rather bland “equanimity,” Osler’s intention had been misinterpreted. He suggested a better translation would be a blending of the words “steadiness” and “tenderness.”

By steadiness, Coulehan meant an emotional stillness and calmness, the capacity to be the eye of the hurricane, a safe harbor in the midst of storm. We might call this quality a kind of centeredness, the ability to be mindful, fully present and awake with each and every patient, neither bored nor “asleep” in the face of their repetitive insistence nor overwhelmed by their suffering.

But steadiness alone can degenerate into detachment and coldness. So Coulehan asserted it must be balanced by tenderness, our ability to be moved by patients’ suffering, to feel a true empathy for their experience, to risk emotional engagement and connection.

One way to think about creative and expressive writing is as a process of reflection on events (in this case, events that occur between doctors and patients_ that produces both steadiness and tenderness. In doing creative writing, and reflecting on that writing, and reflecting on the experience that formed the basis for that writing, we necessarily must step back and view our experience from a different, calmer, more centered and yes, steadier vantage point. We may laugh or cry – or both – as we write but we have sufficient steadiness to keep on writing.

The tears and the laughter I think are part of the tenderness. The difference between writing a chart note and writing a poem is that the chart note is essentially a list of things (symptoms, lab results, differential diagnoses); while all good writing tells a story that comes from the heart. All good writing engages our emotions as well as our intellect. We are moved by the experience we reflect on, and hopefully when they read it, so are others. Miraculously, through writing, we discover a certain gentleness, tenderness and compassion for even our most seemingly obnoxious patient, our most recalcitrant student, and perhaps most remarkable of all, even for ourselves.