

LITERATURE AND MEDICINE CREATIVE PROJECTS FEEDBACK 3/2/06

this was a very insightful poem. You really get how important it is to be open to that “shift in consciousness” between every-day reality and the privilege and responsibility – and yes, sometimes burden – of being present with the suffering other. You’d have to be a saint to do this every day with every patient. But not losing your *capacity* to shift gears, to shift your perspective away from yourself and toward the patient is crucial to becoming a truly good doctor. Whenever you get completely lost in your own problems and stresses, think of Susanna. Although she is not yet your patient, she is why you are here. Barbie, it was a pleasure to get to know you a bit in class. I wish you success as you proceed through your training, and hope our paths will cross again soon. Best, Dr. Shapiro

you are a really fine writer. Your poems were clever, witty, and also humane. They are full of puns and double entendres, which were really funny. Even better, you captured perfectly the *felt experience* of first year students, inundated with information, facts, advice, a long laundry list of do’s and don’t’s, desperately trying to find an anchor. As your last line suggests, as you move from “playing doctor” to “being [a] doctor,” the most important anchor always has got to be your own soul. Thank you for these well done contributions. I hope you keep on writing, as an outlet for your creativity, as a means of coping with the stresses of med school, or just as a way of making your fellow students laugh! I’m very glad you signed up for this selective, and hope you got something out of it. Best of luck with your studies in the upcoming years. Regards, Dr. Shapiro

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Thank you for your active participation in class. You made many perceptive and interesting comments, which were much appreciated. You tackled an excellent, omnipresent issue in medicine. How do people who are imperfect and limited, with tools equally imperfect and limited, have the confidence, day after day, to stand against disease, suffering, and death? Medical students come to medical school thinking, with more than a little justification, that they are the elite of the elite. Yet they are soon humbled by the awareness that, perhaps for the first time in their lives, they are surrounded by people equally talented and elite. And, in this new field, none of them knows anything! So they become humble. I think the danger lies in that, as you proceed through your training, you learn more, you know more, the answers come easily, and you can begin to think your power is limitless. In fact, it’s much more reassuring to think that, than to accept the inevitability of uncertainty, mistakes, and even failure, no matter how impressive your skills, or how profound your knowledge. Recognizing that “we live in a world with limits” is the only way to keep a check on the temptations of arrogance. I was truly saddened to learn that at your stage of life, you have already encountered so many losses of people close and dear to you. However, as you suggest, becoming intimately acquainted with death is one way of reminding us of the inherently limited nature of life. I wish you all the best as you advance through you training. Best, Dr. Shapiro P.S. Thanks for helping me carry the lunches so many times too!

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, what can I say? Your “bunny” poem won my heart. The juxtaposition of two things that apparently do not belong together and have nothing in common is one of the best techniques for triggering “lateral” or “sideways,” out-of-the-box thinking. I think that’s exactly what happened to all of us when we heard your “Bunnies and Medicine” poem. At first I thought (using logic, always a mistake in listening to poetry!) that maybe you were going to perform recently learned cpr on a scared-to-(almost)death little bunny, and save its life. But your poem was much better than this prosaic fantasy. By helping us really *see* those bunnies, by helping us stop and appreciate them, you helped us get a precious insight into what medicine is all about. You’re right: It is “quite funny,” but you really do “do it for the bunny!” By easing people’s suffering, by healing their diseases you will be giving them a chance to enjoy the bunnies – and their lives. This was a really sweet and perceptive poem. Take care, and hope to see you before too long. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Shapiro, Johanna

To:
Subject: RE: Litmed creative project

_____, thank you for sending along your essay. I'm glad I had a chance to read it a second time, because in addition to the issues of death and immortality that we touched on briefly in class, there were some particular things I liked a lot that I wanted to mention. One was that idea of levels of Death, like Dante's Inferno. This seems to me a fascinating and profound insight, and quite in contrast to our need to fix "the moment of death." At least in my view, it suggests that death is a process, not unlike life, a concept I find both intriguing and consoling. So thank you for sharing this possibility. The other thing you wrote which spoke to me was the image of one's soul suffusing into the lives of "the ones close to him when he died." I didn't know whether you imagined this literally or figuratively, but to me it has value on both levels. It is a lovely image to think of the patient's loved ones carrying a little "particle" of the patient in their hearts; and it is also kind of a neat thought that those literally "close," whether they be caring medical student, stressed out resident, or janitor come in to mop the floor, might receive a piece of the dead person's soul. I found both of these images compelling and meaningful, and am grateful that you thought them, wrote them, and shared them. Take good care, Dr. Shapiro

-----Original Message-----

From: _____
Sent: Thursday, March 02, 2006 9:30 PM
To: Shapiro, Johanna
Subject: RE: Litmed creative project

Thank you so much for your kind words,
