

The Poetry of Stacy Nigliazzo

It is often argued that medical humanities, including literature and poetry, can help encourage attitudes of compassion, connection and empathy in patient care. Compassion is distinguished from empathy (a cognitive and affective experience) by its emphasis on action in response to another's suffering. Empathy provides the essential soil for such action through its capacity for understanding (as opposed to just pitying or feeling sympathy for) another's suffering. Yet empathy has also been criticized because of the difficulty of entering fully into another's perspective; and for its selective manifestations (i.e., certain patients generate empathy more easily than others in healthcare professionals).

The "mechanism" by which exposure to or study of medical humanities "encourages" behavioral compassion and/or cognitive and attitudinal empathy is unclear. Poetry, for example, cannot compel its readers to compassionate action. However, it can provide models, as well as behavioral and communicative inspiration, that enable readers to examine their own possibilities for empathic attitudes toward and compassionate interactions with patients. The poetry of Stacy Nigliazzo, an emergency room nurse, provides intriguing and moving insights into how compassion and empathy develop in the author/narrator; and suggests how, by reading and pondering her work, trainees and experienced healthcare professionals alike can consider how best they themselves can manifest these qualities.

I discovered Stacy Nigliazzo's unique poetry in 2018, a chance encounter that led to my being first intrigued, then enthralled. One word that comes to mind in reading her work is *sumi-e*. Literally, "ink painting," *sumi-e* emphasizes the beauty of each individual brush stroke and is immersed in awareness and appreciation of the natural world. Similarly, Nigliazzo's poems are often mere strokes of the brush across the page, using few and often not easily penetrable words, imbued with images of nature (not always beautiful). Yet while *sumi-e* looks to nature for its themes, Nigliazzo looks to illness and her themes are the nurse-patient relationship, marginalized patients, death and dying, and the importance of human connection.

Another Japanese art form that seems relevant to Nigliazzo's writing is haiku. Nigliazzo does not write formally composed haiku following the 5-7-5 syllable structure, but her spare, delicate poems resemble haiku in their apparent simplicity, which is in fact layered with nuance and depth. Like haiku, Nigliazzo's poems often contain two different ideas whose juxtaposition creates deeper meaning. One might also initially think of Nigliazzo's work as similar to "found poems," as often her poetry derives from actual words spoken by patients or written in a news article or from the faithful description of an image from a patient encounter. Yet the meticulous craft that goes into the choice of each word and the spaces between words belies found word's emphasis on discovery rather than creation.

Nigliazzo's use of rare words, or familiar words used in unfamiliar ways, brings freshness to her writing and a constant process of interrogation from the reader – what does this mean? What is the author saying? Because she uses language so sparingly, especially in her later collections, reading Nigliazzo demands thought, effort – and heart. Her poems make you question, force you to consider alternative meanings, encourage you to interrogate the different emotions that arise in response to the words scattered across the page. Judy Schaeffer, herself an eloquent and widely published nurse-poet, comments that nurse-poets tend to favor economy of language as well as precision and this is

characteristic of Nigliazzo's writing as well. Like the medical terms with which she is fluent, Nigliazzo's poetic language is exact, each word weighed, chosen with care and deliberation. Yet these frugal words are also amorphous, each opening a path to multiple interpretations, inferences, and implications.

Although Nigliazzo enters fully into her patients' difficult, sometimes agonizing, often anguished experiences, she often does so through the doors of myth and fairytale. For example, the poem "Moirai" weaves in the role of the three Fates in determining the outcome for a dying patient. Another poem refers to the legend of Rumpelstiltskin as the embodiment of the emotional labor that exacts a high personal cost from its practitioners. In this regard, her poetry embodies Emily Dickinson's injunction to "Tell all the truth/but tell it Slant." Nigliazzo is a great truth-teller, but she rarely comes at her truths, hard-won on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic and at the bedside of anguished or dying patients, head on. Instead, she looks to the natural world, to simple gestures, to inanimate objects to convey the intense emotions in patient, family and nurse – grief, sorrow, consolation and hope.

The nurse-patient relationship is vitally important to Nigliazzo. Sometimes she is so close to a patient that he mistakes her for his wife ("Sharon"). A patient with advanced AIDS and an altered mental state touches his nurse's breast and says he loves her. Later, this nurse and the patient's partner sing to him as he dies ("Aubade"). Through the intimacy of these relationships, she reveals her own philosophy of caregiving. As she puts it, "The nurse's story is the other side of the patient's story." For Nigliazzo, nursing is not just a job but something akin to a devotional practice. She tries to be "a light," "a living prayer" ("197 Days Out"). She notes that nurses receive confidences even family members are not privy to; she promises to listen and to treat the patient's secrets as sacred ("Confidant"). After a late fetal demise, she describes herself as the infant's "silent shelter,/her sanctuary" ("Repose"). In an ED filled with "rage-and sickness" "every stranded soul, [is] her patient" to whom she offers sanctuary ("Purgatory"). She will unabashedly plead and pray for the life of her patient ("Moirai"); and in "Stillbirth" the nurse is not afraid to weep as the mother sings to her dead baby. "Thirty One Minutes" describes a dying patient and a nurse who can't stop compressions, who can't let go because of her intense commitment. In a similar vein, as a patient dies in emergency triage, amid watery images of a sinking vessel, the nurse is "bailing water," seeking higher ground, but with only a "paltry sieve" ("Gush"). Her desperation and helplessness are evident.

Nigliazzo's commitment is to being with her patients through each moment of their suffering, even up to the final one. She is a witness, an acute observer of her patients, able to see beyond disease to their inner core. But she is more than only a witness. She is also intensely engaged with her patients' care. Perhaps it is the profound physical intimacy she shares with her patients – touching their bodies, aware of their bodily fluids (In the poem "Hemoptysis" when a patient enters the ER coughing up blood into a napkin, she observes "I am a steward of viscera") that makes Nigliazzo seem so "intermingled" with her patients. She makes them tea, gives them morphine, sings to them ("song"). Above all, she strikes the reader as fully present in her care for the living and the dead. Because of her clear-sightedness, her absolute attention, while she does not sugarcoat, she is always able to find compassion as well as sorrow, to infuse her poems with a combination of broken-heartedness and tenderness.

This dedication is especially apparent when Nigliazzo writes about marginalized patients. Encountering a teen drug user, the nurse weeps for "all that she is and never will be" ("Transfiguration"). Treating a pregnant drug addict, the nurse observes she is there to help, not to judge (in contrast to doctor ("She needs a line")). Another poem describes a homeless man with dog wandering into the ED. Triage yields

no real complaint, just someone in need of warmth and food. When he leaves, the nurses turn up the heat, perhaps in recognition of the caring he yearned for (“Scratch”).

A critical part of Nigliazzo’s role as a nurse is to foster connection. In the poem “Mask” written during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, she describes the importance of eyes to foster relationship with scared and dying patients. In another poem, she connects a dying pt with her husband by phone (“Carillon”). Preparing a patient for the results of a biopsy, the narrator says, “I let him use my hands” suggesting a willingness to share in his anguish while he waits (“Practice”). The converse of such connection is found in the indifferent, white-coated doctor with a pad of remedies that the narrator can’t afford who, like Pontius Pilate, washes his hands (symbolically absolving himself of responsibility for his patient’s suffering) (“Healthcare Exchange”); and in the patient who longs to be seen as something more than a “fall risk” (“Above His Bed”). Nigliazzo sees her intimacy with patients as emblematic of her profession. In another poem, the nursing staff enter a patient’s life through a storyboard his family makes. They are heartbroken when the man dies after months in the hospital (“Isaiah”). The poem “Chord” notes “the oaring of the human heart”. Perhaps this is Nigliazzo’s acknowledgment of the way the heart must guide us through life, as well as an awareness that our journey through the river of life is always toward home.

Despite her devotion to her charges, Nigliazzo is also aware that practitioners who care pay a price: “Source,” drawing on the classic fairytale of Rumpelstiltskin, wonders whether the narrator can break the spell of medicine’s “cruel bargain.” Nigliazzo further recognizes that, although in clinical practice and in poetry, she is faithful in her efforts to see her patients clear-sightedly, each patient sees *her* differently, knowing only one incomplete aspect of her, so that the result is a “fun-house distortion” of who she really is (“Chirality”). Regardless of all the care and attentiveness she lavishes on her patients, one can never truly know another or be known by another.

Although she generally avoids judgment, Nigliazzo has only unforgiving censure for perpetrators of intimate partner violence and child abuse. In her handful of poems addressing domestic violence, she shows infinite compassion for the victims and harsh condemnation for the abusers. She skewers the self-deceptions, lies, and excuses of the husband, abuser and killer of a dead nurse (“How He Told Police He Found Her;” “Leaving”). In another set of related poems, the repetition of the phrase, “she was” (“Triptych I”) reminds the reader that the murdered nurse was a woman, she was a mother, and now she is gone. The next “panel” of the triptych, “Triptych II,” focuses on the narrator’s anger that this man committed murder, left the nurse’s two children motherless, but his action is unacknowledged and the official version is just that he died, please send thoughts and prayers. In part three (“Triptych III”) we read “we know but we don’t know,” which likely refers to all of us who shut our eyes to evidence of domestic violence in our own lives. She follows this rebuke followed with the command to “tell everyone.” Nigliazzo unequivocally asserts that it is our responsibility, our obligation and our duty - to speak.

Nigliazzo was motivated to pursue training as a nurse because of her mother’s diagnosis of cancer and eventual death. In “Sliver of Pearl, Steely in the Gray Sky” as a loved one (her mother?) is dying, the narrator gives herself instructions as to how to cope, trying to make the unbearable manageable. Perhaps because of her experience with her mother, many of Nigliazzo’s poems address the suffering of patients with cancer. “Malignancy” describes cancer as a greedy thief. Another poem, “What We

Couldn't Treat," talks about the multiple bad omens surrounding a patient with apparently untreatable leukemia. In "Small Cell Carcinoma Invades the Pelvis," Nigliazzo considers the devastation of recurrence. In "Witness," the narrator is a witness to the callousness of the doctor, who ignores his cancer patient's question. A different poem, with heavy irony, describes how "they" (family? friends?) say "*she's never looked better,*" the words like salt to the suffering patient ("Cachexia"). Nigliazzo also acknowledges human resilience when she writes about a woman who has lost her breasts, pieces of liver and spleen to cancer, but still finds joy in the beauty of the cello's body and the sound that it makes while her blood is drawn ("Ophelia").

The deaths of patients in general are very much on her mind. Sometimes death brings peace, as in "Ploughshares", which draws on the Biblical metaphor to show the battle against terminal disease resolving into the harmony of acceptance. Similarly, "Requiem for a Twenty-Six Year Old Holding His Son For the Last Time," describes a dying young father given his son to hold. The infant is compared to a loaf of challah ("hallowed bread"), suggesting a kind of earthy, warm holiness. Life and death literally pass each other, but the emotion, while poignant, is not angry or horrified, rather it focuses on the sacredness of the moment. A similarly peaceful, uplifting image is found in "When her lines went flat": As the patient dies, she seems to soar like a balloon into the "salt-stained sky." Even the heavens seem to grieve this death, but there is no sense of resistance, only a mournful acquiescence.

Nigliazzo confronts the always-painful task of breaking bad news with resolution and calmness. "Cavitation" reminds the narrator to "speak plainly but softly" in informing the family member of a patient's death. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigliazzo softens conveying the loss of a patient to their family by helping them to imagine their loved one walking in "a volant field." "How To Tell a Mother Her Child is Dead" tackles the impossible with grace and precision. She counsels her nursing students to reflect on exactly what is: what did they see? Then they must look directly into the mother's eyes, sit, use the word dead. And if the mother wants to see her child's body, Nigliazzo advises, then let her. The poem is stark yet filled with courage and compassion.

Sometimes the Grim Reaper is represented with prosaic, almost homely imagery, as in "Unlatched Square," where Death is a quilter hiding beneath a "a scrap quilt" with one unlatched piece that he still needs to attach. In "Divination," a patient's dead father comes to comfort her, foreshadowing her own impending demise. Sometimes as death approaches, patients begin to surrender ("Hemorrhage") or prepare themselves methodically for what is to come ("in situ"). Other patients try to linger ("Immortality") or plead "I'm not ready" even as they pass away ("Epilogue"). In another poem about a woman who has collapsed in her home, the fruitless effort to revive her is made more poignant when the narrator observes the artwork of her young children on the wall ("Art"). In "Greensleeves," the narrator contemplates a dead woman who is homeless and wonders who will look for her. Finding evidence of a hysterectomy, she further wonders "*who has loved her?*"

The deaths of children in particular attract Nigliazzo's unflinching gaze. "Six Days Old, total CPR time: 58 minutes" depicts a grief-stricken mother pleading with the staff not to stop CPR on her dead infant. "What His Family Says" intimates the overwhelming anguish of the family on the death of their child in their broken, disbelieving statements. One poem "The day he stopped breathing, I" shows the nurse's meticulous care equally for the body of a dead child and the suffering of the living mother. This same non-distinction between living and dead is evident in "Nocturne" which apparently depicts the death of a child by drowning.

One function of poetry is to help us see the familiar from new angles and experience well-known phenomena differently. Nigliazzo's spare, evocative poetry excels at achieving this physical and emotional dislocation in the context of patient care. A well-known Zen Buddhist saying goes: "In the beginning, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; later on, mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers; and still later, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers." In Nigliazzo's poems, the mountains and rivers of patient care, of suffering and death dissolve, mutate and transform into unrecognizable shapes and forms. But the more we sit with the altered words and imagery the more we realize they are old friends – the fear, pain, loss, grief, mortality that are part of the human condition. In "The Guest House" by the 13th century Persian poet Rumi, he invites us to welcome all aspects of lived experience: "a joy...the sorrows...the dark thought, the shame...some new delight." Through her inventive, original and always generous interpretation of patients' experiences, Nigliazzo helps us "be grateful for whoever [and whatever] comes."