

FM REVIEW 2014 20 COMMENTS

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: This essay has potential. I recommend not rejecting it out of hand. It recounts a visit to a no-frills market and the author's observations during this experience. Both reviewers offer excellent critiques. The essay needs more structure and focus; it also presents stereotypes that should be reworked. I suggest a major revision, following the reviewers' comments, as well as my thoughts below.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: This is a well-written, well-observed story. However, to be a good fit for the narrative essay section, it requires significant revision. The reviewers have highlighted different, but equally important, concerns, so please pay attention to their comments.

In terms of the structural concerns, the questions you pose to yourself about why you are at this market and why you are writing a story are interesting, but never sufficiently answered, especially for the purposes of a narrative essay intended primarily to illuminate clinical and teaching situations for medical educator readers. Is the point that even "in transition" between worlds, you never entirely stop being a doctor? Is this the reason for the central mini-narrative of the old man and his helper? i.e., that you see people differently because of your medically-trained eyes? This is an interesting idea, but would require more examples and more fleshing out overall. Is the point anthropological, to better understand the lived context of your patients? Is it as a reminder of all you have to be grateful for? The focus of the essay needs to be clearer and tailored more to the needs of the journal's audience.

In terms of stereotyping issues, although I am sure you observed the behaviors that you did (slapping children, scolding them with no understanding of their developmental capabilities, giving them inappropriate foodstuff), we also know that such behavior can occur at Nordstrom's as well; and by reifying it in print, it makes it seem more "true," more "real" for the population you are describing in contrast to all the populations you've chosen not to describe.

It is also confusing/troubling when you write "I see a face of poverty" different than you see in clinic. Is the implication that the market is how "poor people" *really* behave – i.e., that they are better behaved in clinic? Is the implication that poverty makes people poor parents? The possibility of such accidental messages needs to be examined carefully.

Similarly, there is an unintentional but disturbing comparison between the healthy foods in the author's basket and the "poor" food choices by other shoppers', again inadvertently suggesting that privileged physicians do a much better job of filling their shopping carts than do poor folks. Then too, although it is a generous (or impatient?) impulse to cover the gentleman's 11 cents for a bag, it might be read as patronizing. Finally, regarding the central case, the older man with the tubing and the smokes, the way the scene is described, there is an implication that the man's smoking may be causal or contributory to his medical condition. Without a fuller context, this runs the risk of being read as judgmental of someone who you don't know at all.

I think it is important to be extremely clear about the purpose of all these observations. What is the reason you are documenting them and what messages might the essay be sending? Again, importantly for the journal, what are you learning about yourself as a physician through this visit to the no-frills market? What are you learning about the patient population you serve? These questions are significant from the perspective of a narrative essay.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR II: The author received a strongly (but I believe fairly) worded review highlighting unintentional cultural/class biases. Much to her credit, she responded non-defensively and thoughtfully, and as a result completely recast the article. The narrator is now very honest that impatience rather than generosity prompted her to pay the difference of the customers ahead of her. The revision to the story shows what true generosity of spirit looks like - and it comes from a fellow shopper, not the narrator. I suggest a few very minor changes.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR II: Thank you for such a non-defensive and thoughtful reply. We see ourselves through one set of lenses, and it can be disconcerting to realize we may have inadvertently come across in a very different way. The current version is very good indeed. First, it has a coherent and interesting organization - family doc at the grocery store, showing the personal dimension couple with the impossibility of ever setting the doctor role wholly aside. You've removed observations that inadvertently could have been misconstrued. You've been very honest in both your kindness and your impatience. The new segment, a wonderful addition, illustrates as you say what true generosity of spirit (and pocketbook) looks like. It's evolved into a really lovely and touching essay.

Two extremely minor points: 1) I was confused by the two January dates, the latter seeming to precede the former. I get it ("fast forward") but you don't want to slow down the emotional momentum by having readers stop to figure this out. Could you say, "Fast forward, a year later" or something to that effect?

2) I wonder if the last line is strong enough. This is what ties the whole essay together: your humble roots, your work at an urban FQHC, your earlier visit to the No Frills market. Your call, but I wonder if it would make sense to briefly recap. "I thought, with my background, with my work, I had humility nailed." Also, is there any way to bring in patients? "There is always more to learn, from my patients, my kids, from complete strangers at the No Frills Grocery." For sure, you don't need the "but."

Thanks again for such a thorough and well-conceived revision.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR III: This is the essays' third revision. The author made all requested extremely minor revisions, and crafted much stronger concluding sentences, as well as a new, improved title. I feel the essay has come into excellent focus, and is actually quite lyrical and interesting. I recommend accept.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR III: This is perfect. The concluding sentences are strong, and as you say, tie in very well with the revised title, which I agree is an improvement. This is a lyrical, well-observed, and touching piece. Always more to learn indeed.