

When Love Impales The Heart...
A Doctor's Poems of Eulogy and Celebration
By
Michael R. Berman, M. D.

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Dedication

To all of my patients and to the Profession of Medicine.

Preface

I am first a physician, a distant disciple of Aesculapius and Hippocrates¹; a clinician, a teacher, a mentor and a student. I am an Obstetrician. I stand before my patients² and facilitate their births. I share their joys, I feel their pains. Yet, caring for the well being and the illnesses of patients and their families is to accept that medical science in all its depth and possibilities is not precise and that human mind and flesh are perishable. We are today steeped in myriad medical technologies that in themselves bring hope to previously hopeless conditions and pathologies. Yet there is inexorable suffering which accompanies failures and tribulations of all new medical technologies. The paradox of new technologies to cure and cause pain is real and evident. I believe that I as a physician have been granted by oath and by ethic the privilege to examine and treat, to counsel and advise a fellow human being while using albeit modulating the use of these technologies. Indeed, the future is bright for medical innovation and the alleviation of suffering, but we must be careful not to allow this technology to wedge the doctor/patient bond. We must recognize and heal those ‘unspeakable’ losses evident when medicine and technology can longer treat and the physician can longer cure for when technology fails, the physician must not. Physicians must set their patients and their families on a course of acceptance, comfort and understanding. We must sit at their bedside and in the pews at their funerals for when our deeds and actions, our skills and intuitions no longer can heal, we must not abandon the *soul* of our patient. These tenets must be propagated and preserved in the education today of tomorrow’s health professionals.

“Medicus Nihil Aliud Est Quam Animam Consollatio”³

¹ In Greek mythology, Aesculapius, son of Apollo, the god of healing, was a famous physician. His mother, Coronis, a princess of Thessaly, died when he was an infant. Apollo entrusted the child's education to Ciron, a centaur, who taught Aesculapius the healing arts. Aesculapius was skilled in surgery and in the use of medicinal plants. Hygeia was his daughter and considered the goddess of health and healing. Hippocrates, a member of the Asclepiadae- priest physicians whose origins may be traced to the mythical personage, Aesculapius- referred to Hygeia in his oath which begins: "I swear by Apollo the physician and Aesculapius, and Hygeia..."

² Obstare from the Latin meaning “To Stand before”; the root word of *Obstetrics*

³ A Latin Proverb translating to: "A Doctor is nothing but the constellation of the soul"

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“The best doctor is also a philosopher.”⁴ Inherent in what defines the physician-patient partnership is an unfaltering responsibility of the physician and an unconditional trust of the physician by the patient. Together these bond the chasm between the vulnerable patient and the knowledge and experience of the physician; a synergy of the *need for care and the privilege of caring*. I believe the medical professional at all levels must step back from each moment in his/her patient care routine, and reflect on what he or she is doing, why it is being done and what influence it is having on their patient’s lives. This self-reflection is integral to professionalism for it encourages the formation of a philosophy of care and ethic of practice which in turns fosters self-examination and meaning, empathy and compassion.⁵

Poetry is my venue for “self-reflection”. A synergy exists between poetry and medicine for each share from their origins themes of life and death, sorrow and despair, love and futility, promise and hope. A simple poem can transfer frosts of despair and gleams of elation inwards, and when written on the occasion of a birth or a death, a tribute or a memorial, a secret feeling or a revealing epiphany- when these poems have a *name* and a *reason*- they answer in the affirmative, “does poetry matter?”⁶

Recently, I find myself increasingly engaged in dialog with my students and young faculty members about the privilege of being a physician, why we do what we do and how we can best help serve our patients. This is a most promising time to become a health-care professional for there is in our immediate future enormous promise in human genomics, cancer therapies and other capabilities of advanced medical technologies. Yet, we must infuse this science with humanism⁷. We need to assure that the benefits of these technologies are fully realized and that their expanding sphere of influence does not disenfranchise the patient, depersonalize the physician-patient relationship and above all, that they permeate each and every family in *every* community.

knew we were here

⁴ Proposed by Greek Physician Galen of Pergamum c.150 BCE

⁵ Professionalism is the basis of medicine's contract with society. It demands placing the interests of patients above those of the physician, setting and maintaining standards of competence and integrity, and providing expert advice to society on matters of health... **Medical Professionalism: A Physician Charter** (Abstracted from Annals of Intern Medicine 2002;136:243-246)

⁶ Dana Gioia, Does Poetry Matter,

⁷ Humanism-“The concept that concern for human interests, values and dignity is of the utmost importance to the care of the sick.” American Heritage Dictionary

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Poetry has enabled me to ask why even when we already understand how. It permits me as a doctor of medicine, witness to the frailties of our humanity, to abet healing through the very core of what makes us human, our language and our personal emotions. It is my hope that this volume, collected on the occasions of loss and celebration, love and understanding, observation and introspection will permit the reader to borrow my words in times when theirs are lost.

"By making us stop for a moment, poetry gives us an opportunity to think about ourselves as human beings on this planet and what we mean to each other." Rita Dove

Marquis
For Joseⁱ

When love impales the heart,
a child's heart,
and first breaths bellow,
and his gentle hands
and soul so mellow
beholds the gift of life so dear,
we affirm that what we hear,
resounding cry without thought
or pain or tear,
is his marquis,
his sentinel of
what we do
and why.
And now he claims for us nobility,
this guardian of ancient temples
royalty lusting to comfort;
longing to heal; unsparing in compassion,
leaving with honor and beneficence
his name undying,
a bequest to us who love him
and to our hearts ...forever crying.

ⁱ Jose was a mentor and teacher of Obstetrics and Gynecology who died prematurely.