



MEDICAL MATTERS

Reflections on Anatomy Lab

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Cadaver dissection is thought to be one of the most challenging experiences in medical school, both academically and emotionally. Dissection is a unique experience for students as it allows them to better visualize the three-dimensionality of the human body, exposes students to diversity and variations of different individuals, and provides an opportunity for developing a patient-physician relationship. In reality, this is the first patient a medical student will have. While the benefits are numerous, the anticipation of dissection of a human cadaver causes some students fear and anxiety. Some students are scared as they face their own mortality and yet other students feel comfortable and confident.

At Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine, the faculty invited students to complete a reflective writing assignment both before and after their first dissection experience. The reflections were in the form of letters to the donor, first person or third person reflections. Here is an excerpt from two of the first year medical students of the charter class both before and after dissection.

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Stephanie: Pre-dissection letter to my cadaver

Dear X,

I know that we have not officially met yet, not that we will ever have the opportunity to get to know one another in the normal sense of knowing, but before I start learning about you so intimately I wanted to let you know how grateful I am for the gift you have given me. I am looking forward to meeting you; it is something that I have wanted to do for a long time now. If, however, our relationship is to get started on the right foot, I must be completely honest with you, I am not entirely sure how I feel about what I am going to do to you. I am excited, but also deeply saddened, grateful, but despondent. My swirling emotions make me feel like an anxious, confused teenager again.

I secretly hope that you are old. Not that being old makes what happened to you any less sad, but it does seem to make it feel less tragic. The older you are, the easier it is for me to imagine you having lived a full life and the easier it is for me to accept that my gift is a celebration of an end to that life. Please forgive me, I understand that joyous occasions of life can only really have meaning through the existence of adversity, but I can find nothing more despairing than the finality of the end. I truly am not the starry eyed girl this letter is making me out to be; I don't believe in blissful fairytale immortality, nor wish for it. I have accepted that death is part of the wonder of living; that I will inevitably lose patients, family, friends, and eventually myself, but such acceptance doesn't make my heart ache any less. Though such mourning is difficult, I wouldn't want to become anymore accustomed to the grief and I hope that I will forever place so much value on each person's life as to lament their loss.

I promise to treat your gift with the honor and dignity such a momentous offering deserves and to complete my work with the respect I would want bestowed upon me. I take my learning extremely seriously and will bring this to my work with you, such that I may use your gift to the fullest advantage to

benefit not only me, but the lives of the others I will care for. Thank you for entrusting your last physical possession to me, I shall forever be indebted to you.

Remember to be patient with me as I explore my feelings in the first couple of times we meet. Know that if I seem reserved at first it is not that I am fearful, just reflective. I am looking extremely forward to learning about you.

With my deepest gratitude,
Stephanie Schley

Stephanie: Post-dissection reflection

Though I was excited to finally experience a cadaver lab, I am happy that we are through the first day of dissection. With any new experience there comes a certain sense of anxiety, and while I had no concerns over my ability to handle the experience, in so much as not being grossed out or nauseated, I was unsure how I would feel emotionally when I actually started working on my cadaver. Like the experience with the cadavers, death carries with it a very mixed sense of emotions, both joyous celebration and sadness. I was thankful to find out that my cadaver is an 84 year old male and the ease of knowing that he had many years of life made the initial experience easier on me. I was excited, but as my lab mates vivaciously dove into the body, I waited and observed, meeting him for the first time and taking in whom he is and pausing to silently thank him.

With each time we are able to work on the cadaver and as my knowledge of what I am dissecting strengthens, I am enjoying the experience more and more. The first day we were the second team to work on our cadaver and there was little actual dissection left for all five teammates to work on; thus, we finished reflecting the pectoralis minor and spent most of the time cutting away small bits of remaining fat. Our second day in the lab, I was excited to dissect into the axilla and find the coveted brachial plexus that I had been memorizing and practicing for weeks. As Elizabeth and I dug in pulling away the fat

to reveal the “M” of the brachial plexus, it was actually perhaps as exciting as presents at Christmas. I was amazed to see the size of the median nerve and the clarity of the brachial plexus components as we cleared the area. I expected that there would be some anatomical differences from the “normal” anatomy of the Netter’s book, but I have been surprised at how extremely diverse the bodies and even sides of our cadaver have been. My only qualm has been my lack of knowledge when we are dissecting and not feeling entirely confident of what I am looking for, but I have faith that with each passing week that I will grow more comfortable and confident with the structures.

Overall, I find the cadaver lab to be a wonderful, exciting, and educational experience. As a visually and spatially oriented learner, the cadaver lab is an important piece to helping me solidify my anatomy comprehension. As my excitement grows, I try to continually remind myself of the significance of the experience and the respect that it is owed.

Adam: Pre-dissection reflection

I am afraid.

I am afraid that when I walk through the unassuming doors of the cadaver lab I will feel a nagging anxiety tugging at my subconscious.

I am afraid that as I walk toward the cold metal table carrying an extinguished life I will falter.

I am afraid that when I look upon the cadaver laid in front of me, I will not see a stranger; that my past and my dreams will come crushing down on me.

I am afraid that the formaldehyde will overwhelm my senses, that I will be transported to that cold room on that fateful day; the walls closing in around me, the heavy air filling my lungs, the distressed silence.

I am afraid that I will see brown hair falling carelessly on bare shoulders, hair that I have played with as a child.

I am afraid that I will see sleeping eyes that require only a small nudge to wake; that I will imagine them opening and looking despondent in my direction.

I am afraid that I will see the familiar creases around small lips that will form a warm smile as I approach.

I am afraid that when I gaze upon the face, I will see the visage of someone dear to me, hauntingly alive.

I am afraid that I will begin to imagine the events surrounding the death and the thoughts, beliefs, dreams trapped in the mind, never to be uttered.

I am afraid that when I uncover the body I will see the destruction of flesh that resulted in death.

I am afraid that with a scalpel I will penetrate more than dead skin, but also painful memories, and even harsher realities.

I am afraid that I will see a womb that bore me, a bosom that sustained me, and a heart that loved me.

I am afraid that I will weep uncontrollably as I did that day.

I am afraid that as I touch the lifeless, cold skin, I will recoil as the foreign tactile sensation signals the finality of the situation as only death can.

I am afraid that my hand will return to the skin on its own, that perhaps I need only to maintain that connection, so that she can absorb the heat from my fingers and enter my world again.

I am afraid that as I snap out of my deep contemplation, the pain etched on my face will betray me to my classmates.

I am afraid that I will be weak; that the enormity of being reminded of what I wish I could forget will weigh heavily upon me.

I am afraid that I will wear this grief like a badge on my white coat into every patient's room.

I am afraid that every death I encounter will add to the weight.

I am afraid that I will not be able to become a doctor, because I have not overcome death.

Adam: Post-dissection reflection

As I explored deeper into the vast wealth of knowledge bestowed upon me, I imagined myself traveling with Lewis and Clark on a beautiful and imaginative adventure. An adventure that many have undertaken before me, with its many points of interest thoroughly identified and memorized. But to me, at this particular moment in time, this was an entirely new frontier that I was charged with exploring, not only in anatomy but also in philosophy.

I felt an enormous sense of awe and inspiration as I unwrapped the canvas on which life had etched its mark. Using my books as a map, I discovered the foundation to which the body's geography attached and surrounded. I meticulously followed the tributaries as they flowed within ravines, imagining the torrent coursing through them with each beat. I identified the vast and complex network that conveyed ethereal thought into tangible, physical action.

I pondered those thoughts once contained within this functioning system. What was the driving force that gave life to this cadaver? And in a moment of clarity, I realized I had failed to consider up until now the life in front of me, so engrossed and lost in my own past, in death.

How conceited must I have been to be imposing this knife on this body that is the physical representation of everything connected with the life that was? The long life that preceded this day, the relationships, the experiences, the soul. What right did I conjure up to claim such fundamental ownership of everything that this life was, and in doing so, channel that essence into the future, through me? Consider as I did the duality of life and death, of past and present, of present and future.

All those events that transpired as they did in this man's existence culminated here on this table, on this day, in front of me. Yet this existence did not end on this table, for I had absorbed some of that essence as I explored the cadaver, as the knowledge passed to me, and so the existence continues with

me as its vessel, with the future as its path. The responsibility I felt at that moment, while perhaps not as grandiose as that of Lewis and Clark, would one day impact real people, with this past life as my guide, my Sacagawea.

I welcomed the responsibility to learn every intimate detail and hold on to that knowledge, cognizant of the sobering fact that the day would come when I would have to use the knowledge to better humanity. Welcomed, because this would be the morally acceptable condition that would allow me the right to impose my will, my future on this man's past life.

This final consideration was humbling, and one that washed away my anxiety that I had felt before the dissection. For those concerns were solely focused on me, rather than on the patient in front of me. My concerns were trivial, even selfish, and I have come to see that. This patient passed away in June at the age of eighty of respiratory disease. He is, was and now will be, through me.