

Lessons From Our Learners

William D. Grant, EdD Feature Editor

Editor's Note: Submissions to this column may be in the form of papers, essays, poetry, or other similar forms. Editorial assistance will be provided to develop early concepts or drafts. If you have a potential submission or idea, or if you would like reactions to a document in progress, contact the series editor directly: William D. Grant, EdD, SUNY Upstate Medical University, Department of Family Medicine, 475 Irving Avenue, Suite 200, Syracuse, NY 13210. 315-464-6997. Fax: 315-464-6982. grantw@upstate.edu.

Life In 55 Words: Part I

Submissions for this special column were required to meet the following basic criteria: Relate—in exactly 55 words (not including the title)—an experience that influenced the author or author's practice of medicine. Submissions came from several countries and reflected a wide range of experiences and emotions. Because of the number of outstanding responses, I have elected to publish selections in two columns with Part II following in a later issue. Some of these are titled at the choice of the author.

Entering notes, skipping from screen to screen. Trying to get everything in the right place so I don't need to come back to this chart. The elderly woman grabbed my hands from the keyboard and yelled, "STOP TYPING! Look at ME!!!" I threw the computer keyboard aside, moved my chair closer, looked in her eyes.

*Suzanne Gehl, MD
Medical College of Wisconsin*

Eldest and last of a People, who spirited out of Oklahoma, who tells of a child's view from a travois, in the shadow of Little Big Horn. All of them are here now, to grasp the talking stick, to burn the sage and to keen, to see tumor do what snow and steel could not.

*William M. Woodhouse, MD
Idaho State University*

Sister Agnes ruled Saint Luke's alone, defining quality, credentialing, utilization, and dress codes. Dedicated to patients, community

and God, she expected excellence; encouraged, taught, motivated, and consoled both staff and physicians. Now replaced by minions of administrators, chiefs, directors, work teams, and task forces (none equal to her talent), may Sister Agnes rest in peace.

*Robert W. Smith, MD, MBA
University of Pittsburgh*

The Historian

Alone, standing in the outfield, John heard whispers, mostly his name.

He couldn't hit the ball, not like last year.

After fruitless scans and EEGs, neuropsychiatry visits, and failed antipsychotic trials, an older sister drives to an appointment, and asks,

"Those gas rags that are always around to clean his mini-bike, could they cause this?"

*Osman N. Sanyer, MD
University of Utah*

Unexpectedly
pregnant woman
expectant man
a family of two
nurse
doctor
and then, surgeon
a surgery
newborn baby
mom
dad
a joyous family of three
suddenly,
mom
blood oozing from her pores
another surgery
and yet another
And mom was swept away in a
river of blood
motherless baby
bereaved dad
A family of two

*Lynda Alper, MEd, LCPC
Carle Foundation Hospital*

Soft Interventions

Hospitalized, tough, 40 year old. Alcohol, drug problems. Agitated learning he had cancer. Taught him and his three biker buddies imagery to self-calm. His imagery choice?

"I'm five. Sitting in front of Mom. She's rubbing my head. Thanks for helping me go there again." I'll work on my biases and always offer such "soft" interventions.

John Clabby, PhD

UMDNJ-RWJMS-CentraState

Chocolate Cakes

She is dying now.

She is fed through a gastrostomy.

Her face is deformed

By an extensive larynx tumor.

I will keep her in my memories for ever

Trying to understand

Why

That little and admirable woman,

Even being unable to eat normally for months,

Used to make and offer

Delicious chocolate cakes

To doctors.

Maria Auxiliadora Craice

De Benedetto, MD

SOBRAMFA (Brazilian Society of Family Medicine)

My Patient

My patient

Confide in me in silence

Wisdom decision to know yourself in silence

For you it is a sweet moment

Because the ways of your heart

You have learned it

Because you immerse in this ocean without fear

The ocean that watches your soul

Soul injured by the illness

Illness that purifies your soul

Rokia Sanogo, MD

SOBRAMFA (Brazilian Society of Family Medicine)

50B

I am a psychologist being stalked.

I am different from them (the ones being abused). He judges me. "I will grant this motion..." I am

relieved (believed, validated) and scared (what have I done?). I walk out of the courtroom. Head down.

Face flushed. I don't feel so different from them (the ones being

abused).

Michelle E. Kane, Psy.D.

Moses Cone FPR, Greensboro, NC

Quietly, I enter. She lies in bed holding her baby. Tell me about Dameon I ask. Softly, she speaks of her love for him. Slowly, we undress and inspect him. Perfect features, blue eyes, 10 fingers, 10 toes. I dress him. Gently, I take him to the morgue. Later, I hold my son and cry.

Elizabeth G. Finigan, MD

University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry

Leaving the clinic for the homeless—white coat, stethoscope—I saw a woman smoking outside. I gestured, about to deliver another warning on the dangers of smoking. She too extended her hand, but beat me to the words: "Sure, you want a drag?" Destitute, she was willing to share her last cigarette. Would I?

Sabina Diehr, MD

Medical College of Wisconsin

July, M-3, post-call, no time to be sick. Attending, bearded, respected, diagnoses strep, offers penicillin. Awe, relief, gratitude. "You can leave" to the nurse, "pull up your skirt" to me. Surprised, embarrassed, . . . but he is a doctor. Awkward. "Thank you." I got better. Twenty years, many shots later, that one still stings.

Linda N. Meurer, MD, MPH

Medical College of Wisconsin

A dying daughter. What are uncontrolled diabetes, high blood pressure, and elevated cholesterol to a grieving mother? It is not supposed be this way...she's the one who is suppose to...What do I say?

How do I treat this woman whose let all her problems go to care for her daughter? Encourage, comfort, and cry together.

Patti Burk Olusola, MD

University of Texas Health Center at Tyler

The Index Case

A runny nose and slight congestion. The risks of primary care, I think. Not a concern. No treatment required. Probably viral. A cough now, too. Progressive. Paroxysmal. Severe. Post-tussive emesis, and now apnea, also. Awakened at 2 am. Another bad coughing spell. Prolonged. Was that a . . . whoop? Dawning recognition. I . . . have . . . pertussis. The index case.

Michael Flanagan, MD

Pennsylvania State University

Why

Her daughter spins around the exam room, a three year old in an eight year old's gangly body. "Why" she asks me. "Why is she like this?" I offer what is in my possession to give—my help, my care, and my presence. Gently, I offer the only genuine answer I have, "I don't know."

Jennifer Frank, MD

University of Wisconsin

Blue Velvet

Bring your meds.

He always did; in a blue velvet bag, an elegant offering each visit.

Weakness, paresthesias, falling; He couldn't wipe.

Cervical stenosis. Delays. Frustration.

Finally, neurosurgery and rehab.

Months later, a follow-up visit.

He hands me his meds in a crumpled brown paper bag.

Where's your blue bag?

The hospital threw it away.

Colleen T. Fogarty, MD, MSc

University of Rochester

Late Again

Running late in clinic, I apologized: Someone that morning needed more time than scheduled. I didn't say if it was depression, a miscarriage, or a beating, or all three. The patient touched me with understanding: "Someday, I will come in with a special problem and I know that you will make extra time for me."

William R. Phillips, MD, MPH

University of Washington, Seattle

“Your mother has no pulse.”
I’m confused. She’s alive. A distant hospital. Her doctor can’t take a pulse?

“She is in heart failure.”

“What do you mean, ‘no pulse’?”

“The advanced directive form, POLST—Physician Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment. She has no POLST. She’s refusing an IV.”

At 88, she can refuse anything.

Richard Viken, MD

University of Texas Health Center at Tyler

Tonton (Beloved Uncle)

The Sisters found him in the marketplace, covered with flies, lying in the hot Haitian sun. As I removed his ragged clothing, he could only moan in response. I bathed him, washing away his suffering along with the dust, the urine, and the excrement. “*Merçi, Tonton*” (“Thank you, beloved uncle”), he whispered as he died.

James Sanders, MD, MPH

Medical College of Wisconsin

Bloodletting

“I think my daughter is depressed.” She wouldn’t talk. She wouldn’t smile. She is angry and doesn’t know who or what she is mad at. She has tears dripping from her cheeks. She has scars on her arms. “Why do you cut yourself?” “It’s the only way I can make what I feel inside visible.”

Kyle D. James, MD

University of Texas Health Center at Tyler

Longing for His Silence

I miss him so much. I was devoted to him in the last 16 years. He couldn’t speak after that stroke but he always looked at me, hearing my stories, my complaints about insomnia, or back pain. Smiling, ever, incessantly. And I always felt he understood me, comforted me. Now I miss his wonderful silence.

Pablo González Blasco, MD, PhD

SOBRAMFA (Brazilian Society of Family Medicine)

No legs, No arms. Deaf. Blind. Diabetes ravaging her body, mind. A suffering soul dying. Despite defects overwhelming she verbally chose to try to experience another day. Family acquiesced painfully to her desires and I, the intern, watched astounded. We traced letters on her forehead to communicate. Her will to suffer to maintain life illuminates.

Peter J. Koopman, MD

University of Missouri-Columbia

Condolences

Alone she stood in the waiting room, crying silently.

“I’m sorry. Your mother died this morning.”

“I thought she was going to a nursing home.”

“We did too.”

“Can I say goodbye?”

“Of course.”

“Will you call the pastor?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you.”

My condolences were all I could offer. I wish I could give more.

Jenny Chen, MD

Columbia-St. Mary’s FHC, Milwaukee

The Genesis

Knocking door to door. Remote West Africa, malnourished infants, anxious mothers, a green student teaching: “breast feed your babies.” The birth of a family doctor. Fast forward 10 years, technological advancement, a heart institute, robotics center, same, not so green resident doctor, teaching new mothers: “breast feed your babies.” The path lies the same; regardless.

Amimi Osayande, MD

East Carolina University

The First Day . . .

County hospital, first day. First year students. 106 degrees. No air conditioning. Six patients to a room. Man in bed #1 yelling, “Jesus hates doctors.” Students quaking. Sweltering. Interview patient. Two students, pale go down. Doctors = patients. Wheel chairs. Ice

water. Cool towels. Orange juice. “Is becoming a doctor always this strenuous?” they ask.

Jo Marie Reilly, MD

University of Southern California

Rural Delivery

It is my first year in rural practice. Morning rain. I am digging in the garden, my jeans caked in mud. A neighbor stops abruptly on the gravel road. “Doctor, doctor, come quick, there is about to be a delivery.”

I race to an aging pickup, as she adds, “Hurry, our goat is gonna deliver!”

Jeff Susman, MD

University of Cincinnati

Late for an autopsy on a hot day in Memphis. Thin woman walking toward me. “Brenda?” Hugs, soft hair, always so quiet. “How are you? We had to close the shelter. I started medical school. “Are you okay?” She was turning to go. “You made the best banana bread I’ve ever had. I felt home.”

Lois Van Tol, MD

University of Rochester

She’s having her second baby soon. With her husband she decides this is the last pregnancy. Two children will be just right, they decide. She wants her tubes tied. I offer an IUD. My clinic requires her to see an IUD video first. There’s no IUD video in Spanish. Now she’s expecting her third baby.

Brenda Grant, MD

Cedar Rapids Medical Education Foundation

It has amazing powers to heal the mind, the body, and the spirit. It’s easy to see *it* when you’re the patient. It’s *faith* that keeps you present—at the bedside, on the phone—when you’re the healer. Can I discover when I am the healer, when I am the patient . . . or when I am both?

Neal Sheeley, LMFT

Cedar Rapids Medical Education Foundation

Quality of life was important to Mr Dudley. A retired aircraft mechanic. Accustomed to his independence. We compromised on an extra diuretic pill to be given with his treasured weekly Sunday ham biscuit. In a subsequent fluid overload hospitalization he complained, "They wouldn't give me an extra pill!" He had gotten sausage instead of ham.

*Irene Hamrick, MD
East Carolina University*

Noncompliant

Easy for me to judge. Easy for me to stereotype when you don't come to your appointment. But your child is ill, your cabinets are bare, your family is hungry, your eviction notice arrived, and your pain is real, emotionally and physically. Hard for me to imagine, but is it easy for me to care?

*Deanna R. Willis, MD, MBA
Indiana University*

We became friends as residents—first with her, then with her husband and daughter. She had another daughter, then we had two, then she had a son. Our families became very close. Now her son has brain cancer. He's three. Their courage astounds me. Suddenly, I have a new perspective on everything.

*Fight, sweet Henry.
Sean M. Oser, MD, MPH
Pennsylvania State University*

My hand on the door, Kevin coughs loudly and says: one more thing, doc. Am I okay to work today? Take this note, I say. Thanks, doc. Before he says more, I quickly walk toward the door. One more thing, doc. My lady friend and I, oh really it's me—you think Viagra might help?

*Dean Gianakos, MD
Lynchburg FPR, Lynchburg, Va*