

When Love Impales the Heart...a doctors poems of eulogy and celebration

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Marquis

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.

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

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*

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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 Animan Consollatio"*³

"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

I am 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.

We are not parents without our children, and when our children, conceived through our love and nurtured through our bodies and our spirits, are lost to death, we remain parents forever. There is such remorse when a child dies or a pregnancy fails. With each, a part of our own humanity is lost, never to be found.

The need to reach out to others is both inherent and acquired. There is a "beauty and a tenderness that man can give to man." Through family nurturing and family values, children grow to appreciate that without thoughtfulness for others, their motives throughout their lives will be selfish and unfulfilling. Indeed, we all have a need and an obligation to care for others. Yet physicians, I believe, are in a foremost position to carry out these deeds and other idealisms that they profess through their practice. Whether in academic, research, or clinical practice, laboratory medicine or diagnostic imaging, the physician's role is to bring comfort and to heal others. From such healing will come self-reward, self-fulfillment, and honor. If we as healthcare providers are surrounded by despair and inequities

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

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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and have the opportunity to help with their dissolution, it is our obligation to do so. We as human beings can be distinguished from our ancestors by our capacity to think, to speak, to choose, to consciously procreate, understand the value of our actions, and have the ability to 'hope'. Thus, I believe hope is a singular gift we must never destroy.

The profundity of a parent's grief when their child has died has remained incontrovertible through the ages. There has not been, nor is there now, one common and standardized way to manage the recovery from such grief, for its shadow has been, and will be, indelibly imprinted in the minds and souls of these parents. A child is not expected to die before his or her parents. The natural processes of birth, life, and death should follow in an orderly and rational sequence through one's lifetime. Any death other than one from old age, after a rich and fulfilling life, is premature. When parents see their child die, or carry the burden of an unborn child's demise, or for purpose and reason must end a pregnancy, they live with this disruption of natural order forever. Thomas Murray, the late former director of the Hastings Center for Biomedical Ethics immortalized in the title of his book what, from the beginning of life to its end, children mean to their parents. The title of his book is simply: *The Worth of a Child*.

“The physicians of the Hippocratic era called medicine The Art. They knew that the care of their fellows was an act of creativity. They also recognized that each patient and his or her physician form a bond that is unique unto itself. That bond is the foundation upon which healing takes place. The bond's formation and maintenance is the fundamental aspect of The Art, no less a creative act than is healing itself. It goes beyond the notion of mere empathy and sometimes comes very near to being a form of *love*. It is when we *cannot cure* that the bond of patient with doctor reaches its ultimate challenge.”⁸

There is a need to instill a sense of how important our influence and presence is to our patients when they experience their losses. As physicians, we must formulate an approach which will permit us to provide our patients the comfort and hope they require and should expect from us. I believe we must grasp and understand our own feelings to better serve our patients: we must serve our patients through both science and humanism. By becoming more introspective and more emotionally involved in what we are doing, our compassion will become evident and our patients will benefit. Technology indeed provides better diagnostic and therapeutic medical care, but as more technology is developed and utilized, Health Professionals may become more reliant on that technology and less on their interpersonal skills. They will have to learn –or relearn- and practice the traditional art of medicine, of *listening and talking to patients, holding their hands, being at their bed side*, while complementing the use of modern technology and advanced science. We as physicians must assure that the benefits of these technologies are fully realized and that their expanding sphere of influence does not disenfranchise the patient nor depersonalize the physician-patient relationship.

It is the highest privilege to be a Doctor and to care for patients and to be a part of their intimate lives as human beings. We can listen to their stories and take care of their illnesses in a way that no other profession can. Yet when a patient's child is lost during a pregnancy or beyond, we struggle to find the right way to break the news, provide the appropriate medical or surgical treatment, and help her and her family to recover physically and emotionally. Unfortunately, most of us haven't been taught to provide such bereavement care. We quickly learn that there are hospital nurses, social workers, bereavement counselors, support groups, and clergy to whom we can refer our patients. When we attend a patient who has experienced a pregnancy or neonatal loss, rational thoughts fade as we struggle to find the right words to say. Unlike performing a surgical procedure repeatedly, no matter how many times a physician shares this loss with his or her patient, it never gets easier. It cannot be *scripted*. We must recognize any loss in pregnancy as a life-altering event for our patients and a significant emotional experience for us as their healthcare provider.

⁸ Sherwin B. Nuland, MD from the forward of *Parenthood Lost: Healing the Pain after Miscarriage, Stillbirth, and Infant Death* by Michael R. Berman M.D.

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The obstetrician is the link between the pregnancy loss and the grieving family. Obstetricians- particularly those in training programs-must realize and understand how important our influence and presence is to our patients when they lose their babies. Yet we've been the last to embrace the idea of incorporating bereavement care into our curriculum and practice. I believe the care of the patient experiencing a pregnancy loss is a paradigm for what we do as physicians. It tests not only our clinical skills and judgment; it stretches the fibers of the human aspect of caring very thin. We might ask, "How can we heal when our patients' children are incurable, when they are suffering or when they die?" or "what do we do when the advanced technology that has become a part of our black bag fails"? We must understand that we can heal by providing comfort, empathy, and hope. As bad as this experience is for our patients, we can make it better. If we remain aware that we are this link between the loss of a pregnancy or child and the bereaved family, then we can share this with them, remember this with them, and from this point forward, heal with them. The bond we form becomes the unbreakable fiber that strengthens and indeed cements our role in the doctor-patient relationship

The value placed on the unborn and newly born has differed through generations and periods in human history, yet terms of expression implicit in symbolic language-poetry and verse, song, prayer and ritual-have served a role in all cultures and societies in dispelling the tears and fostering the healing from death and human loss.

It is well recognized now in the general medical education curriculum that the inclusion and assimilation of art, literature, poetry, bioethics, law, end-of-life care, theology and at its core, humanism, into the education of medical professionals is essential to help them appreciate that their life's work is truly one of privileged human relationships. I learned this early on and though a process of self-examination and reflection, found that the personal writing of poetry could serve as an outlet for my feelings. Tears cannot adequately portray our grief as we begin a search for reason and comfort. Words we write, words we read, and words we hear can serve as an invaluable source of solace. Words are songs from our hearts and can be "songs of hope, songs for hope." I believe hope is a singular gift we must never destroy. It is an endless song in an endless concert; a nocturne bright in the darkest of nights. Poetry is its instrument, and its music can enable hope.

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 when written on the occasion of a birth or a death, a tribute or a memorial, a secret feeling or a revealing epiphany.

The impact of words and thoughts at these difficult times are universal. Sometime ago, I received a note from a father who just had lost his prematurely born daughter to the condition called twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome. One twin died in utero and the remaining twin was born at 25 weeks, gravely ill and on life support systems in the Newborn Intensive Care Unit. After a brave but futile struggle, she, too, died. Her father contacted me from England, asking if I could suggest some words to read at the memorial service for his children. I sent a few lines to him and his bereaved wife. In their reply I learned that they placed these words upon the headstone of their twins' grave. Needless to say, I was quite humbled by this use of my poetry.

Let us not succumb to this portent,
The solstice of our darkest hour.
For it is but a finite point
Upon an infinite journey
Which began with all creation and
Upon whose path walk
The souls of our children;
Pure as the silence of the virgin winter,
Alive with winds of indomitable hope.

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We are a society of communicators. Through our speech and literature we portray ourselves, just as paint applied to canvas forms a portrait. We should not underestimate the influence of our words, for they are empowering. In a moment they can help; in less time they can hurt. They can bring peace, and they can create turmoil. A few simple words in an appropriate situation can have inordinate influence.

Like most every physician, my career is rich in poignant stories of patient's lives and illnesses, which have impacted and shaped my career. All have juxtaposed finite technology with the ephemeral human condition rendering both hope and tragedy. My patients have been my teachers, etching in the crevices of my mind human lessons and insights. Their medical, surgical and emotional travails helped me become a complete physician. 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 platform to tell my stories, to honor my friends, and grasp the essence of the "family of man". It is my hope that this volume, collected from 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.

Selected Poems from

When Love Impales the Heart

*Nadiyb*⁹

A poem dedicated to and in memory of Shep Nuland, my mentor,
friend, renowned author and professor at the Yale School of Medicine

Truth. The frigid air frosts our skins. March, unrelenting, chills us.
The carapace of virtue stripped bare with one last breath; a sigh,
a thought, a song, a prayer, a plea, perhaps a smile.
Aware that we must all leave but before, must cleave
from every moment every morsel of that which humanity has gifted us.

He knows of scythes that gleaned, of seeds spilled then
rearranged, in wombs of fragile, fallen leaves where rooted
embryos await to season next; incarnate, reverent, to bare and bloom,
to live again and die and live and die and live.

And we know the seeds of all nobility remain alive in deeds
of noble men as he. Of men that live and write of worth and truth
and yearn to teach, abet and heal and love the words of centuries past,
unfinished some, and others cast anew to burn in hearts where shadows
rise and fall to crave his wisdom, pillars forged by mind and hands for all.

His scalpel carves it path. The body, impotent to maladies;
thirsts for harmonies of cure by gentle ways and artful skills
to dignify the countless souls infirmed and helpless wills;
and of those he healed, now left to wail, doleful as diaphones
in morning fog they mourn until they sleep.

Truth. Our heavy hearts will lighten as we remember brighter moments.
His deeds bequeath immortal dreams. Petrified in our senses,
visions indelible, a benevolence to appear and reappear like seasons,
and remind us that we shared in words or voice, in thoughts or touch,
the sacred air he breathed each day.

⁹ Hebrew: A Nobel Man

*Amare*¹⁰

Forlorn, with tears
And cries, am I.
To lose you to your death
Without but even gasp or sigh,
Save a wisp of Angel's breath;
...the darkest sorrow
I have known. Yet,
Your image burnt in my
Soul is my gift, my grace,
And always will I see your face
Upon the simmer of
Placid ponds
 And in the clouds where
Sunbeams hide
And raindrops form,

...And I *will speak* kind words
And write of you
And sing in sweet demure,
In early morning's dew
And in the crown of daffodils
Which bloom amidst the storms
Swept cross my brow,
In every dream
In which it seems
You come to me.

My love forever
Do I avow.

¹⁰ From Sanscrit meaning *Immortal*

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*Tiferet*¹¹

In prayer we plead return,
And in dream, awaken!
We fall to stare at gleaned grasses
Scattered about forgotten fields,
Singed by a senseless lot,
And thirst to cry forever.

Yet,
We will not be draped
In the blanket of loneliness called solitude.
For deaf of song and absent of vision
Of who we are and who are our children,
Its veil will descend, then disappear.
We are "alive together".

The margin between breath and breathless
Is narrow, like twilight and darkness.
Moments of simple thoughts
Become ageless memories.
There is triumph to taste,
Love to embrace;
Havens of hope to inhabit.

Soon, the curtains of chaos
Will rise with the setting stars
As memories of joy
Bond with joy itself
And we will smile once more,
At last to breathe a painless sigh
Of what is love.

¹¹ Tiferet, in the discourse of Jewish mysticism is one of the ten Sefirot and represents beauty, harmony and truth.

*Memnon*¹²

My tears are watermarks
Which imprint forever
Sentient reminders of gentle hopes
And dreams subdued.
Extant in painful thought they are
And sleep afar
In caves of ancient echoes
Wailing for my perished child
Who now guised in angel's silk
Sings madrigals of sweet delight
And turns my tears heavenward
To drift peacefully into the
Forgiving canyons of winter's night.

¹² *Memnon*, the son of *Eos*, Goddess of Dawn, who mourned his death by weeping every morning.

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Saline

I grasped his strong hand
weeping edema beneath
mottled skin and
pulsed coded messages.
Then with a kiss
placed gently upon his brow,
withdrew, and said good-bye.
Around us, aprons of sand
embroidered shores of saline oceans.
Inland, grasses wove their tapestries.
Grains, blades and salted pools mingle;
reservoirs for creation,
repositories for death.
Silent is our
morning's song,
lost our morning's glory.
The grasses, stilled by quiet winds sleep
day-long now. Rays of crimson sunbeams
like thorns, pierce
the clouds of our despair
as our dissonant cries fade
into nothingness.

Martyr for Desire

for all children, lost

You are my quiet darling.
Your eyes, like morning burn
The minutes of futility
To contrite hours, turn
Eastward where begins the dance
Of ocean tides, and slumbers still
The famine of our grief, to hide
So deep within my wounded will.
A promise, poisoned from the start
So brief without reply or song
Did graze your spirit in my field.
"Return to me" I cry, I long.
As chaos prods my anguish, yet
Neglecting fortunes in my soul,
Tinted hues of destiny
Are tender thoughts which sorrow stole
From me when first I heard your voice;
Each murmur on your breath that sang
Like harps converging as a choir,
And chimes afar, with passion, rang.
You are my quiet darling
Within a cold and flameless fire,
And I, a prism in the shadows;
A silent martyr for desire.

The Mist

*When winter's gloom succumbs,
and grief melts in the sun,
warm currents on my breast will stream,
and turn frosted tears to sunbeams...*

Sadness moistens my brow like
mist. Silent tears coalesce upon my cheeks.
Petrieved by the cold of winter,
Forgotten by the spring thaw,
I shiver and feel lost
in this the season of my sorrow.
Loss has embraced me more than
once, yet it has never seized me.
Hope has been my reclamation,
My emancipation,
From the bondage of despair.
Hope exists in the swelter
Of summer and persists
As the leaves fall in November.
Hope thaws the snows of winter.
Hope does not forget.

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Tinos¹³

To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Fortunate, are those...
whose lives so fragile,
And in just being, so struggle
To feel a sense of freedom
From the pain
Of malaise and hunger,
And the maladies
Which from the formative years
Steal their persona;
Fortunate are those...
Whose lives are touched by you.

You have learned and witnessed,
Taught and practiced
The tenets of what it means to give,
And live your dream.
And now, with profound kindness...
You will overwhelm the pity of physical agony,
You will plant seeds of happiness in gardens
Disrupted by blight and sorrow.
You will care when caring seems lost.
You will cry when caring has lost.
You will smile when your kindness creates peace.

And of tomorrow,
You will see
Through mists of uncertainties
Which veil the newly born and older.
And with passion, skills and fervor,
Pursue cure and order
For afflictions of a blameless child.
As no greater worth is there
Than for you to share what
Rests inherent in your heart:
Your Art, Your soul, your sense
Of right and wrong.
And above the rest,
A righteous ethic that strives,
Without pretense, to heal, lifelong.

¹³ For those who choose the healing arts. Tinos is a sacred Greek Island in the Cyclades and is considered the ancient center for arts and healing