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Feature Editor

Editor's Note: In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. jfshapir@uci.edu.

Poetry, Mindfulness, and Medicine

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Recently, there has been interest in applications of mindful practice in medicine.¹ However, among medical educators, questions about the concept still exist: "What exactly is mindfulness? And how does one teach it?" This paper briefly introduces the concept of mindfulness and explores its potential importance to clinical practice. How to teach mindfulness to medical students is then discussed, using poetry as one possible instructional method.

Mindfulness can be defined as compassionate, nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment.^{2,3} In mindful practice, gentle and objective attention is brought to all experiences as they occur moment

by moment—one notices thoughts, emotions, and body sensations as they arise and pass away.³ The beneficial implications of applying mindfulness in medical practice include increased concentration, clarity, and decision-making ability; greater empathy for patients; and a greater ability to cope with stress associated with the profession.¹ In a recent study, first- and second-year medical students who participated in a 7-week mindfulness elective course demonstrated decreased depression and anxiety, as well as enhanced empathy and ability to cope with stress.⁴

One goal of this elective course was to give preclinical medical students useful and practical tools for incorporating mindful practice into their personal and professional lives. To achieve this goal, various methods were introduced to teach mindfulness to students. In addition to traditional training in formal meditation techniques, poetry was included in the sessions on a regu-

lar basis to deepen students' understanding and experience of mindful practice.

Other scholars have noted that poetry often produces a sense of freedom and openness, allowing for a spaciousness of interpretation, openness of the senses, and a deep experience of understanding distinct from cognitive comprehension.⁵ In this class, reading and discussing poetry appeared to provide students with an alternative route to learning, allowing them to feel, listen, and discover in different ways.

Excerpts of the poetry used during this mindfulness class are detailed below. The intention behind the use of each poem, as well as the students' experiences, is discussed. Since each poem affects individuals differently, in reading on, I invite you to notice the effect of the excerpted phrases on your own body, emotions, heart, and mind. Notice what arises, and see if you can simply observe each response with nonjudgmental compassion.

(Fam Med 2001;33(7):505-7.)

In the first class, we explored the general theory of mindfulness. One important component of mindfulness is acknowledging with acceptance the full range of human emotion. Mindfulness views all emotions as important data or messages, which, if listened to and allowed, will help create greater health and well-being. To illustrate this idea, we read "The Guest House" by Rumi, the 13th century Persian poet and philosopher:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness . . . Welcome and entertain them all!⁶

One student commented that the idea of acknowledging all her emotions, the joy as well as the fear and confusion, was frightening. The image of her emotions as guests, and she as the welcoming hostess, helped her begin to transform this fear into openness.

We also pondered a poem by the 19th century German romantic poet Rilke, to deepen the idea of embracing all emotions and observing them nonjudgmentally to gain greater clarity and understanding.

. . . So you must not be frightened if a sadness rises before you larger than any you've ever seen, if an anxiety like light and cloud shadows moves over your hands and everything that you do. You must realize that something has happened to you. Life has not forgotten you, it holds you in its hands and will not let you fall. Why do you want to shut out of your life any uneasiness, any miseries, or any depressions? For after all, you do not know what work these conditions are doing inside of you.⁷

The second and third classes emphasized awareness of the body. Students learned a body scan meditation, in which they carefully attended to each part of their physi-

cal selves, as well as hatha yoga practices. These exercises were done to help students listen to and connect with their bodies with greater acceptance and awareness. In this context, we discussed Rumi's poem "Today":

. . . Take down a musical instrument. Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the earth.⁸

Students interpreted the command to "take down a musical instrument" as referring to the body, moving the body, playing with the body, and becoming familiar with it. One woman commented that viewing her body as a musical instrument evoked memories of her violin and the care and love with which she tuned it. She realized the importance of treating her body with the same honor and respect. Another student shared that while lying on the floor in a yoga pose, he felt his heart beating for the first time.

When the course is half completed, students were asked to review and renew their intentions for learning mindfulness. Intention is a fundamental component of mindful practice. It is crucial to bring awareness and contemplation to why one is practicing and how one practices.² We studied "The Summer Day" by the contemporary poet Mary Oliver to feel the importance of intention: "What will you do with your one wild and precious life?"⁹ We followed this poem with a discussion in which students shared in small groups what their intentions were at the beginning of class and how they had evolved.

Throughout the course, we regularly emphasized the cultivation of compassion and acceptance. As students began to observe themselves and their lives, aspects of themselves or their situation that they did not like inevitably arose. During the last classes, we practiced a loving

kindness meditation, teaching students a specific technique to cultivate greater love and kindness toward themselves and others. Deepening the experience of loving kindness, we recited "Enlightenment" by John Welwood to emphasize the importance of accepting oneself as one is in the present moment.

. . . Open your heart to who you are, right now, not who you'd like to be, not the saint you're striving to become, but the being right there before you, inside you, around you, all of you is holy . . .

In the final class, students sat in a circle sharing their experiences and their intentions for continuing mindfulness practice in their personal and professional lives. The theme of connectedness and interconnectedness, which had been a subtle but ever-present current throughout the class, became explicit. Students shared the importance of connecting with others in the class and the importance of feeling that they were not alone. One student disclosed that she felt simultaneously more fearful about her future profession and more able to cope with the challenges. She shared that she was now more empathic, and, yet, genuinely experiencing a patient's pain frightened her. However, she felt that this newly cultivated empathy would also make her a much more patient, compassionate, and effective physician. She felt that mindfulness practice not only helped her to be more sensitive, it made her stronger. She realized that she wasn't alone in facing the pain, doubt, and fear that arise in the medical profession.

Whitman's poem, "A Noiseless Patient Spider," helped articulate this awareness that we are not alone:

. . . And you O my soul where you stand, surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space, ceaselessly musing, venturing,

throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them, till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold, till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.¹⁰

Hearing Whitman's words, we could acknowledge the bridges formed in the class and the connections established among us all. I asked the students to take a mental snapshot of everyone else in the class, thereby holding the entire class in their mind's eye, recognizing that we all are continuous companions, supporting each other on our journey to live mindfully.

The class ended, yet the poem continues. As the sound of the temple bell fades, its echo lingers in the flowers.¹¹

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