

History Giving: Narrative Writing and Global Health

AAFP Global Health Workshop 2017
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FAMILY PHYSICIANS
STRONG MEDICINE FOR AMERICA

“There is no greater agony than holding an untold story inside of you” (Maya Angelou)

- history taking → history giving...

Experiences living and learning globally often deeply affect us and despite important opportunities for presenting about experiences and group debriefing, many of us are left with complex emotions and processing about who and what we encountered and how that may have changed us. The practice of “history giving” instead of “history taking” can preserve and honor what we learn from others’ lives and cultures (while maintaining appropriate confidentiality), be a creative outlet for connecting and help develop resilience, preventing burn out and cynicism.

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Narrative medicine

- Developing a storied structure to health, disease and life
- Storytelling is one way in which we become more in touch with ourselves and humanity
 - READING
 - WRITING
- Lucy Candib in “Making Time to Write” reflection in AFM (2005) talks about three types of writers – “wedgers”, “desk un-clutterers”, “schedulers”

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Arthur Kleinman – The Illness Narratives

- *“Illness has meaning; and to understand how it obtains meaning is to understand something fundamental about illness, about care, and perhaps about life generally.”*



Kleinman, Arthur. 1988. *The illness narratives: suffering, healing, and the human condition*. New York: Basic Books.

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WHY write about global health experiences?

- To be a witness – to give voice
- To tell a story - to demonstrate companionship and connection
- To support human rights and dignity



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Why write about global health experiences?

- To help us notice – “close reading” and writing foster skills in noticing, listening important to the practice of medicine.
- Our life stories meeting patient stories
- *“Open your mind as widely as possible -then signs and hints of an almost imperceptible fineness will bring you into the presence of a human being almost like nothing else can.” (Virginia Wolfe)*

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WHY write about global health experiences?

- Debrief and process – re-processing trauma or emotional events and “re-coding” the associated memories...
 - remembering and recording can help us heal and integrate
 - holding a “mental camera” up to a memory*
 - “We don’t learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience” (Reinhold Neibuhr)
 - “It’s hard to get the news from poems, but men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.” (William Carlos Williams)

MacCurdy, Marian (2000) “From Trauma to Writing: A Theoretical Model for Practical Use.”
Writing & Healing: Toward an Informed Practice, Edited by Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy. National Council of Teachers, 2000. 158-200.

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The Nepal Royal Family Massacre – June 2001



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About Rain



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Honduras with UNC medical students



PHYSICIANS

Be Present



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Narrative Writing Assignment from UNC Global Health course...

As an option to replace one of the reflection papers, students may alternatively complete a **narrative writing assignment**. The length of the narrative assignment should also be 4-5 pages in length (12 point font and double spaced) or if poetry is preferred as a medium this should be no more than 2 pages. The purpose of a narrative piece is to deepen an understanding of the power of literature and encourage an empathetic, engaged and creative account of a potential global health scenario. On the Foundations in GH sakai site there is a series of photographs that can be used as a “jumping off point” for creating a story. Each of these has a limited amount of factual information which can be used for simple research about the issue and geographic area depicted (e.g. a child with newly diagnosed HIV in Rwanda – before creatively writing the story, read a little about the HIV epidemic in Rwanda, current incidence and most common modes of transmission, where antiretrovirals are available, etc). If you would prefer to base this on a scenario of your own, include a description or photograph with your submission. The narrative piece should be believable, original and connected to broader global health contexts.

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**Engaged learning model –
“Research based” Narrative Assignment**

- Integrating factual information
 - e.g. social determinants of disease, mortality/morbidity realities, realities of structural violence in a community
- Use of intellect, emotion, creativity – not just “grand solutions” to global health problems but deeper understanding of complexities and connection

Lenchuca, R. A research based global health assignment for narrative education. *Adv Health Sci Ed.* 2014, 19: 129-142.

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**Young girl with her
HIV+ father in
Rwanda**

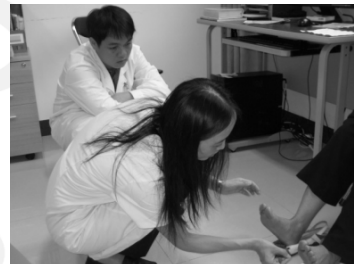


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**On the way
to the
hospital by
stretcher
ambulance
in Nepal**



Teaching about Diabetic foot care in China



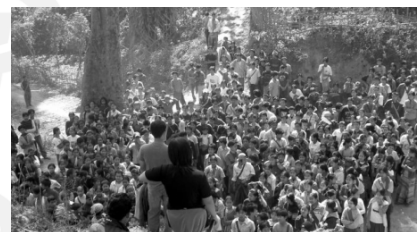
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Setting up clinic in Honduras



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**Public announcements at
Refugee Camp in Thailand**



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Students have also contributed from their own experiences....

- "The Birthing Arc" – a narrative reflection on observing the differences in hospital birth experiences in Ecuador, Colombia, Cuba and the USA
- "It's a long walk" – poem about a woman seeking care for OB fistula in Nigeria
- "100 days" – the story of being in Kenya as a medical student during a physician's strike

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Thoughts, ideas, questions, experiences with narrative writing and global health?



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References

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Resources

- Examined Life workshop in Iowa - <http://examinedlifeconference.com/>
- Program for Narrative Medicine at Columbia (various levels of workshops, also a blog, on line "narrative medicine grand rounds" - <http://narrativemedicine.org/>)
- Pulse - on-line narrative medicine "journal" - <http://pulsevoices.org/>
- NYT article/blog - Finding Poetry in Medicine - <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/doctors-poetry/>
- The website of Daniel Ofri - Literature may save us... <http://danielofri.com/literature-about-medicine-may-be-all-that-can-save-us/>
- BU Program For Global Health Story-Telling (Communications) <http://www.bu.edu/com/academics/internships-opportunities/opportunities-abroad/program-for-global-health-storytelling/>
- "Famous" physician poets/writers to read:
 - Rachel Naomi Remen (FMM/Healer's Art)
 - Sir William Osler
 - William Carlos Williams (US physician, East coast)
 - John Keats (died young, and actually never practiced)
 - Amit Majmudar (contemporary, Indian immigrant radiologist)
 - Oliver Wendell Holmes (19th century US poet/surgeon)
- Anton Chekhov (mostly short stories)

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