



MY SILENT TEACHER

Celia Johns



While my interest in medicine has been lifelong, my real journey into the medical world started in earnest this past August, when I began my first year of medical school. I have been so impressed with the many wonderful teachers and role models who have stepped in to share with me their love and passion for medicine,

but possibly my greatest medical mentor has also been my most surprising.

I met her during orientation week as I was starting my first year of medical school. Orientation week was jam-packed with many activities: practical but boring ones including getting assigned a desk and getting my student ID picture taken; interesting but impractical for a while like learning to suture, and practicing intubation, in the SIM center; and thrilling and terrifying ones such as study tips from sophomores. After being given the “Medical school learning is like trying to drink out of a firehose” analogy, I met her. I walked along with my classmates to the third floor of the medical school instructional building, where the now-familiar aroma of formalin began to invade my nostrils. We headed into the anatomy lab, clustered around posted lab group assignments and found the way to our table. I glanced around nervously at the five people surrounding the large metal table with me. I hoped that they would be good lab partners, hard workers but mostly nice people. Then to my surprise, the course director instructed us to open up our tables to meet our cadavers.

Then I met her. Boo, as I came to affectionately call her, was lying face up on that cold steel table, covered in plastic wrap. The nakedness and the stillness were arresting, and I found myself amazed at her vulnerability. She had completely given herself to us and trusted that we would take good care of her, that we would make her gift worthwhile, that we would let her live on through our knowledge and memory. That moment when we uncovered Boo really stuck with me and was the foundation for how I handled anatomy lab for the rest of the year. The lab became sacred ground, a place for people who had passed on but were not done giving. I

learned a great amount of anatomy from Boo, from her muscles, nerves, arteries and tendons. However, I found that I discovered many more things than simple anatomy. I developed patience as I strained to isolate and identify delicate nerves. I worked through frustration as I discovered more layers of fascia than I ever could have imagined. I developed an amazement and awe for the human body as we delved into the intricacies of the brachial plexus. My lab partners and I grew in teamwork as we relied on each other through the good days and the bad, the simple and the complex.

As much as Boo taught me, she left me asking questions. When dissecting the pelvis, we discovered that she had a hysterectomy at some point. I found myself so curious. Had she been able to have children? What were they like? What was she like? When we discovered her nearly pristine lungs, I felt so proud of her. Her lungs were mostly pink, whereas tables around us showed telltale signs of lung cancer and emphysema. Boo showed me that there is so much to each person, and that even after going through each and every part, one is still left with questions.

This amazement for the human body, this curiosity about the lives and well-being of my patients, this keen awareness of the vulnerability of my patients in bringing their bodies before me, are lessons that will stick with me. Gross Anatomy is over, and I will likely never spend so much time with cadavers (I don’t see forensic pathology in my future). But my time with Boo, although brief, was life-changing. She taught me lessons and served as a role model, the epitome of self-gift. I hope I can continue to live these lessons out throughout my career in medicine. **LM**

Note: Celia Johns is a rising second-year medical student at the University of Louisville.