



Creative writing as a way of learning in medicine: Ananth's story

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I am still a medical student and already I realise how intricately woven together are the lives of the patient and the doctor. As doctors, we cannot be exempt from the pain that accompanies disease; we cannot deny the power vested by the patient in our spoken word.

What follows is a work of fiction based on my experiences so far with patients and caregivers. This work is inspired by one of my teachers, Dr. Rahul Bansal, who is head of the department of Community Medicine at Subharti Medical College in Meerut, India. He encourages us to write about our experiences with the hope that we won't forget our humanity in the hustle of life as busy medical students.

In our first posting in the department, we started off with responding to the question "who am I?" - the self-introspection helped us learn about ourselves. Other equally engaging

methods are used to remind us not only of our own humanity but also of the humane side of our chosen profession. These include movie screenings (Patch Adams, Anand), visits to an old age home, an orphanage, a school for children of labourers and an urban health centre, and role-plays on medical malpractice and breaking bad news. After each of these endeavors, we were required to write our reflections based on what we learned, followed by a discussion in small groups of 15-20 students.

These activities - and especially the reflective writing - reminded me of my interest in creative writing which I had kept in abeyance after joining the medical course. My teacher, noticing my passion, assured me that a medical career does not have to be at the cost of all other interests - in fact, he says that reflecting and writing may actually help in making me a better, more observant

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and empathetic doctor. In addition, I may one day be able contribute to medical journalism which is a poorly developed field in India.

The following is a work of fiction:

“Ananth has become irritable over the last few weeks. I thought it was merely the summer taking a toll on him, but then today he decided upon a rendezvous with his estranged garden. He waddled around quietly, and was sniffing at the flowers when he landed with a thud - with apparently nothing to trip over. It was then that it struck me that he needed medical attention again.”

“You did the right thing in calling for care, Mrs. Mathur,” I said. It was evident to me that she had been holding onto her composure, but dread lined her eyes darkly and prayer coloured her trembling lips.

“His disease...it is progressing rampantly, is it not, doctor?”

I could feel my tongue turning to parchment but I gathered my wits. “Progressing, yes, but not at a hectic pace. He is regaining consciousness slowly. Of what assistance can I be to you till then, ma’am?”

“How long is it before he forgets my name?” Her eyes filled.

How profound her fear, how deep its clutches...

My books were bereft of advice on this matter – I would have to fathom on my own how to handle the over-riding fear that flamboyantly ruled the uncertainty of a life with dementia. My books also don’t speak of how to manage the hope buried deep within my patient and his care-giver.

Should I dampen the carer’s hope in a disease that I know is progressive and debilitating or should I bolster it with the goal to strengthen her resolve? Instinct told me to try and find a middle ground.

“Mrs Mathur, his disease will entice his long term memory, I agree. He may not recollect the apple pie you baked him last winter or his bike from college, but it’s all too soon to surrender your existence to its evil clutches!”

She was still looking haunted.

I continued, “The disease is right now a part of him, so he is liable to get weaker - but he is not his disease. Let it not dictate the terms on which you live – you must have some faith.”

“I’ll try,” she murmured.

“Now we will pluck up some courage and go and meet Mr. Mathur, shall we?”

We walked to his room side-by-side, and I noticed a new energy in Mrs. Mathur’s step.

Her husband was awake and alert when we went in.

“Mr. Mathur, how do you feel?” I asked.

“Oh very well - bound by these many tubes and wires of yours, doctor,” he responded, smiling through wrinkled lips.

“Is that another fat tear rolling down your cheek, dear?” he asked his wife. “Do tears offer you comfort, Sandhya? Well, if it is so I will not attempt to stop them, but if they stem from fear then I would like to remind you that I am still alive, am I not?”

“Yes, Ananth, yes you are.”

“Then offering a smile should not be too expensive, I believe.”

I could have moved away but I was intrigued at this exchange, at the care-giver being comforted by the patient.

“It has been three years, Ananth,” Sandhya Mathur reminded him. “That was the time when you managed to misplace your car with the key still in your custody...”

“Ah! I parked it in the neighbours’ garage - you have told me quite a few times already. That was a good occasion for a laugh, though.”

“Then you started to lose your fluency...”

“See, in so many years I finally had evidence that you understood me without words.”

“How, Ananth, how do you manage to be so jolly even in times such as these?”

“Sandhya, there is no way to sugar-coat bad news. It came knocking at our door three years ago. Why not go with the flow – why not, with the beautiful

ribbon of courage, gift wrap it and make it look almost appealing?”

Biting her lip, Sandhya shrugged.

“Life is full of uncertainty, Sandhya. In that scenario, we know one thing for certain, that my expiry date is approaching. But I’m still alive - is that not reason enough to celebrate?”

“Yes, Ananth, it is.”

“So, now will you promise to smile along with me till the very end?”

“I do, I promise, Ananth.”

Over the next year, Sandhya smiled - she smiled everytime Ananth remembered her apple pie, after each attack of forgetfulness subsided, whenever he took his medicine without fuss - even though the disease gave her progressively decreasing opportunities for smiling. She simply refused to give up.

Ananth slowly grew exhausted and completely dependent. It became increasingly difficult for him to function and for Sandhya to sustain the care-giving work, but being true to her word she smiled until the very end.