

FOREWORD

Too Long Too Short

MARK VONNEGUT, MD

As a second-year medical student, I was still trying to do everything perfectly because if I didn't maybe they wouldn't let me be a doctor. I was cutting sutures for a surgeon who was closing after an abdominal procedure.

"Cut."

I tried my best.

"Too long."

"Cut."

I tried again.

"Too short."

And so forth, for the next twenty minutes or so.

"Cut."

"Would you like the next one too short or too long?"

I spent two years as part of the admissions committee at Harvard Medical School. I was surprised by how many applicants had professional-caliber artistic talents. It seemed unfair that these young, gifted applicants could do other things so well. The committee referred to artistic accomplishments as "extras."

The arts are about as extra as breathing. The arts keep you awake and let you make use of your remarkably advantaged point of view.

Well over 90 percent of the time, the diagnosis is in the story—what the patient tells us. The physical exam and imaging and lab tests are mostly done to confirm what we learn from what our patients tell us.

The differential diagnosis is a list of competing narratives.

You need the arts to help you figure out who your patients are. Huck Finn, Lady Chatterley, Willy Loman, and Ophelia, to name just a few, will all come to see you disguised as patients.

There have been many great writers who were also doctors. My favorites are Anton Chekhov and William Carlos Williams.

A writer is not a confectioner, a cosmetic dealer, or an entertainer. He is a man who has signed a contract with his conscience and his sense of duty.

ANTON CHEKHOV, 1897

The same is true of being a health professional. There's a seriousness about what we do. We're not confectioners, cosmetic dealers, or entertainers, or we're not

supposed to be. We're serious observers and students of the human condition, or we're doomed to boredom and falling asleep on the job. We're dedicated to expanding the limits of what medicine can do. We're driven by a conviction that things don't have to be the way they are. We are hopefully useful malcontents who have the power to help, change small things, and be a part of changing bigger things.

A society that gets rid of all its troublemakers goes downhill.

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN, 1973

There's a perception that the arts and sciences are in competition. Sigmund Freud was famous, among other things, for not being able to figure out what women wanted. He was obsessively jealous and worried that his fiancé, Martha, would be—must be—attracted to musicians and artistic types, of which he accused her on a regular basis. How could he, a dogged, 5'7" neurologist compete? Maybe by winning the Nobel Prize for his work on cocaine, a prize that ultimately went to some silly ophthalmologist who noted its anesthetic properties, thus making a long engagement even longer. (The money from the Nobel Prize would have let Freud buy a house and get married.) In spite of the considerable lengths that Martha went to reassure him, he could never believe that the answer to what she wanted was him.

Although he tried always to be a scientist and to bring order to the messy business of what it means to be human, Freud was incapable of leaving the borders of what we know and what we need to know alone. He was eventually awarded a Nobel Prize, but it was for literature because he wrote so beautifully because he had to write to figure out what he thought.

To be a good clinician you have to shut up and let the patient be the most important person in the room. To create the space and opportunity for the patient to tell you what's wrong, you frequently have to refrain from reflexively doing something.

Don't just do something, stand there.

ELVIN SEMRAD, MD, 1954

Nothing in science will teach you how to be quiet, curious, hopeful, or tenacious. Art gives you a way to move forward without knowing exactly where you are going. You have to be open to luck and to what the situation gives you. Without art, you're stuck with yourself the way you are and life as you think it is. If you want to change the world or need to change the world, use art.

I strongly recommend that everyone, but especially health professionals and students, take a shot at making something out of nothing. Whether it's music or painting or writing and regardless of how well it turns out, making art changes the world from one where you can't make art to a world where you can. And maybe it will be beautiful or maybe you can see how to make it better or maybe you can have a conversation with a loved one about it.

And it will make you a better professional and a happier person. Do not believe all that stuff about tortured artists. You should have seen them before they wrote those poems, painted those pictures, wrote those symphonies.

I paint and know other doctors who do as well. Painting has the advantage that you can't possibly make a living at it. I think a lot more about the lines and colors I get wrong than the ones I get right. The principal clinical usefulness of my paintings is that they give nervous patients something to look at and talk about.

"Did you really paint that?"

"Yup."

When I paint I think more clearly. I notice my notes and observations. Things are less repetitive, routine. I connect dots. I write more than "ST TC+ AMOX₂₅₀TID_{X10}."

Don't let anyone tell you that it's not about you. It's about you. How honestly you go about the job. How open you are to being taught. How willing you are to be uncomfortable and need more.

The arts grow your soul.

Actively reading good writing is a creative act that can open your world. Writing makes you more genuinely curious and less placated by platitudes. Unless you try to write it out, you don't really know what you think. Freud was amazed to learn what he thought; books' and books' worth that he would never have known about without writing.

If you write, paint, or play music, you change yourself, and you change the world from one where you can't do such a thing to one where you can. It might make you a better health professional, or it might save your life.

How we construct a diagnosis, how we fall short, try again, succeed, and question our successes is exactly how we read or write a story.

History of present illness plucks out salient details from the maelstrom and constructs a story that makes sense—or not. The problem is that you're often expected to write these stories in less time than it takes to wash your face and brush your teeth. Being a health professional means you never have to make stuff up anymore if you don't want to.

A student once asked the French writer, André Gide, if he should try to be writer. "Only if you have to," said Gide.

Study the humanities and the arts as part of your professional training only if you have to. You probably have to.

