When I was a little girl, one of my favorite bedtime stories was *The Gift of the Magi*. For those who aren't familiar, it is the story of a husband and wife who each give up their most prized possession to buy the other a gift. The wife sells her hair to buy her husband a chain for his watch, and the husband sells his watch to buy his wife a beautiful clip for her hair. The first time I heard this story, it made me sad. Yet I came to learn that the beauty of their love was not just in knowing what was near and dear to the other, but also in the selfless nature of their gift. Today, we are celebrating the ultimate selfless gift: the gift your loved ones gave us, in sharing their body, to learn by exploration.

Anatomy lab is the quintessential experience of medical school; some students initially dread the experience, others approach it with great trepidation, and some of us eagerly anticipate the opportunity to learn from our first patient. I was a part of this latter group. In fact, I have had the opportunity through my undergraduate, graduate, and now medical school programs to learn from three different cadavers.

From these experiences, I was able to gain an early appreciation for the distinctive anatomy of each patient, and the story that unfolded throughout our time with them. Certainly, there are some common threads: every dissection begins with a delicate analysis of the skin. The student apprehensively becomes familiar with the intrinsic strength and resiliency of the skin, while learning to use the tools of anatomy examinations. As soon as they get used to the skin, the student encounters a new tissue: the muscle, pausing to admire the inherent beauty of this tissue, elegantly wrapped in shimmering layers of fascia. We continue our exploration, noting the tangible difference between arteries and veins. We marvel at the delicate strength of the nerves, following them to their final sites of innervation. Yet what is most amazing is the variation. As we dissect, we discover anatomical anomalies, and learn the incredible range of "normal" function. With each step we gain more insight into anatomy, and physiology, and ultimately some of that person's existence. We follow the GI system, identify the lungs, the liver, the pancreas, the kidney, and marvel at the organs and systems that work constantly to sustain life. We hold the brain and heart in our hands. We wonder about the lifetime of thoughts, loves, heartaches, joys and experiences, and how these two organs made that individual the unique person you knew in life.

Our anatomy experience presents an interesting dichotomy: without any personal or identifying information, we develop an intimate relationship with our cadaver. We delicately explore every inch of their physical frame, with some idea of what we are looking for but mostly in awe and with admiration for the story that is unfolding in front of us. We gain clues and insights into some of the joys and pains of their lives: knee cartilage damaged from years of running, exaggerated spinal curves, hiatal hernias that might have made them short of breath, surgically repaired inguinal hernias, replaced joints – their surgical history laid out like a map. The conclusions we draw, and our experience dissecting, tell a part of the story of how they lived. Their stories have become inextricably intertwined with our own. They provided us with our foundation for the language of medicine. Every patient we see takes on that internal structure.

There is no better way to learn anatomy that from this hands-on approach. Our understanding of the relationship between form and function simply cannot be taught in a classroom. Our awe at the intimate associations and beauty of the human body is a gift we have been given by your loved ones. Thank you for supporting their decision to be our first patients, and to be our teachers, and for celebrating their selfless gift with us today.