Stacey Britain

It has been nearly a year since we began this program. With all we have been through in this short time it seems it was lifetime ago, and yet we remember the excitement, the fear, and the nerves as though it was yesterday. We each came in with different experiences and expectations of what anatomy would be. For some this was to be their second or third time dissecting, while others had never even seen a dead body. We were excited about the new experiences in which we were about to embark. Some of us had confidence in our skills, others were anxious. Some were comfortable with the anatomy lab, while others needed a little gentle encouragement to open our table, get out our tools and make the first cut. While we may have been uncertain as to what to expect, there were a few things we knew to be true from the beginning. We knew we wanted to prove that we deserved to be here, that we were smart enough and tough enough to handle a rigorous program. We knew that this course would be a foundation upon which we would continue building over the next three years. And we were also painfully aware that throughout the course of the summer we would learn and learn, and learn some more about these anatomical structures.

As the semester progressed we discovered that we were actually learning more than we anticipated, and it wasn’t directly related to the vast amount of material. The entire experience was more physically exhausting, mentally and emotionally challenging than we would have been able to anticipate. Amidst it all we were thrown into this challenge with people we had just met, trying to balance our professional side with the intense personal emotions that would come out in lab. With each day lab became about so much more than learning the structures and preparing for exams. It became about the people. Not just the people with whom we were working, but those who sat in front of us every day, teaching us without ever saying a word.

There was a great feeling of responsibility that came with knowing this body in ways that he never did, that those closest to him never would. Yet there was the understanding that I really did not
know him at all. Dissecting the hands was difficult. Who did these hands hold? What did they produce? Who did they carry? We moved deeper into his chest and abdomen, the evidence of his intense disease staring us in the face in the form of anatomy we could barely recognize, distorted by cancer and surgeries. What was his life like before his disease? What did he experience, where did he travel, who did he love? What was his life like after his diagnosis? How long did he live? How did he die? Not by which disease process did he die, but how did he die? Were his friends and family with him? Was he comfortable, at peace; was there any laughter to offset the grief? These were answers I did not have, I still do not. No textbook could give me insight into who he was as a person. I could mentally trace the vessels running through his body, but I did not know the life that once coursed through them.

The lessons that I learned in anatomy are many. While there are certainly those that came from textbooks and lecture, were it not for the experiences I was given by this man and those who loved him my education would not have been complete. I am constantly visualizing what is going on in the body. When someone is sore, I am picturing their muscles. If they have a blood clot I envision their vessels. He has taught me anatomy because he has given me an even deeper, more intimate look at the human body than I ever could have imagined. I greatly appreciate this experience, and yet, for me, the real lessons run so much deeper. I know that I may know what is physically happening to a patient’s body, but that in no way means I know that patient. It is my duty, my responsibility and above all my honor to know these individuals and their families who trust me with that which is most important, their health.

I wondered about this man constantly. I never again want to look back and wonder about a patient, about who they were and what was important to them. I will seek to know and feel grateful to make the journey with them, wherever it may take us.

William James said “act as though what you do makes a difference. It does.” I hope it gives you joy to know, that even if their death, your loved ones made a difference. Those who gave themselves to
us, the sacrifices that you have made to allow us these experiences have made a difference. For that we honor you, and in two simple words that carry so much meaning, we say simply, Thank You.