Healing with Stories: Medical Humanities and Narrative Medicine

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organization of session

- materials / methodologies of the medical humanities
- typologies of illness narratives
- imagination and empathy
Ceremony,
Leslie Marmon Silko

“I will tell you something about stories. They aren’t entertainment. Don’t be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death. You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories.”
...about narrative
narrative is a story...

- teller
- listener
- time course
- plot
- point

- singularity
- inter-subjectivity
- temporality
- causality
- ethicality
narrative medicine is...

having the clinical skills

• to recognize
• to absorb
• to interpret
• to respond

…to stories of illness.
The Illness Narratives
Arthur Kleinman

“…the interpretation of narratives of illness is a core task in the work of doctoring.”
“…a scientifically competent medicine cannot help a patient grapple with the loss of health and find meaning in illness and dying.”
Stories of Sickness
Howard Brody

“...patients come to physicians with broken stories as much as with broken bones and broken bodies.”
...narrative value
“…storytellers all, bearing witness to one another's ordeals, celebrating our common heritage as listeners around the campfire, creating our identities in the stories we tell.”
the medical humanities

for the patient…

• to listen more discerningly
• to understand different viewpoints
• to hone communication skills
• to foster tolerance
the medical humanities

for the professional…

• to confront our biases, assumptions, and preconceptions
• to determine how we interpret
• to heighten personal awareness
• to foster self-scrutiny
Philosopher Charles Frankl

“The humanities are that form of knowledge in which the knower is revealed.”
the medical humanities

for the community. . .

• to provoke wide-ranging moral inquiry
• to reveal tensions and conflicts of moral life
• to foster critical and empathic thinking
• to complement principle-based approach
for the patient:
patterns and problems of
pathographies
“To think about a story is to reduce it to its content and then analyze that content. To think with a story is to experience it affecting one’s own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one’s own life.”
why do we tell stories?

• storytelling is a personal act.
• storytelling is a social act.
• storytelling is an ethical act.
“Misery,” Anton Chekhov

- the ethics of voice
- the ethics of listening

“To whom shall I tell my grief?”
what kind of stories do we tell?
restitution narratives

- most commonly told
- reflect the desire to be well again
- filled with tests, treatments, outcomes and professionals
- happy endings
- tales of healing and heroism
“Healing,” Alicia Ostriker

Brilliant–
A day that is less than zero
Icicles fat as legs of deer
Hang in a row from the porch roof
A hand without a mitten
Grabs and breaks one off–
A brandished javelin
Made of sheer
Stolen light
To which the palm sticks
As the shock of cold
Instantly shoots through the arm
To the heart—
I need a language like that,
A recognizable enemy, a clarity—
I do my exercises faithfully.
My other arm lifts,
I apply vitamin E,
White udder cream
To the howl
I make vow after vow.
chaos narratives

- opposite of restitution
- life never gets better
- shattered promises of remedy and progress
- painful revelations of impotence and futility
- no happy endings
“Having it out with Melancholy,”
Jane Kenyon

1. FROM THE NURSERY

When I was born, you waited
behind a pile of linen in the nursery,
and when we were alone, you lay down
on top of me, pressing
the bile of desolation into every pore.
And from that day on
everything under the sun and moon
made me sad—even the yellow
wooden beads that slid and spun
along a spindle on my crib.
You taught me to exist without gratitude.
You ruined my manners toward God:
“We’re here simply to wait for death;
the pleasures of earth are overrated.”
I only appeared to belong to my mother,
to live among blocks and cotton undershirts
with snaps; among red tin lunch boxes
and report cards in ugly brown slipcases.
I was already yours—the anti-urge,
the mutilator of souls.
2. BOTTLES

Elavil, Ludiomil, Doxepin
Norpramin, Prozac, Lithium, Xanax
Wellbutrin, Parnate, Nardil, Zoloft.
The coated ones smell sweet or have no smell; the powdery ones smell like the chemistry lab at school that made me hold my breath.

3. SUGGESTION FROM A FRIEND

You wouldn’t be so depressed if you really believed in God.
quest narratives

• memoir, illness is part of the life story

• manifesto, illness demands social action

• mythological, illness is the mechanism for rebirth and reinvention
“What are the forgotten or buried events that suggest an ultimate explanation for the evolution of depression and its later flowering into madness? After I had returned to health and was able to reflect on the past in the light of my ordeal, I began to see clearly how depression had clung to the outer edges of my life for many years. Thus depression, when it finally came to me, was in fact no stranger, not even a visitor totally unannounced; it had been tapping at my door for decades.”
For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice…

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to afraid with our mother’s milk…
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
We were never meant to survive.
25 July 1984 - Mother, the name of this thing is the eel.
26 July 1984 - Mother, this man is now all eel.
26-30 July 1984 - Mother, this man will stay a man.
releasing imagination and empathy

“...as we move from the is to the might be, to the should be.”

Maxine Greene
“Fall of Icarus,” Brueghel