

**Johanna Shapiro, PhD**  
Feature Editor

*Editor's Note:* In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. [jfshapir@uci.edu](mailto:jfshapir@uci.edu).

## 55-word Stories and Care of the Underserved

**Joel H. Merenstein, MD; Steven Wolfe, DO;  
Sandy Sauereisen, MD, MPH; Philip Pritchard, MD;  
Jackie Weaver-Agostoni, DO; Stephen Wilson, MD, MPH; Tapan Kant, MD**

Learning to “Teach Care of the Underserved” has been one of the core missions of our faculty development fellowship for many years. Our goal is to have fellows consider care of the underserved as, at least, a part of their future work as clinicians or teachers and to influence their learners in that same direction. We have used didactic sessions, discussions, and seeing patients in our own health centers to achieve this goal.

This past year, we expanded our Teaching Care of the Underserved curriculum by adding experiences with selected mentors who have devoted their life’s work to the care of underserved people. Rather than have fellows merely report back on their reactions and feelings, we use

Transformative Learning Experiences (TLE). TLE are defined as planned learning activities that create the conditions for deep learning and transformation of attitudes as well as increase in knowledge and skills. Examples of TLE activities include journaling about reactions and emotional responses, self-assessments, short and long projects, and reflection on/presentation of a poem, story, or image for a Medicine and Literature session. TLE are most powerful when reflection is first done by the individual and then processed with a mentor or peer group.

Another focus of our fellowship program has been Medicine and Literature: how to use literature in teaching medicine and how to express one’s feelings in writing about the work we do. Fellows have written stories, poems, and essays as part of this effort.

In expanding our Teaching Care of the Underserved curriculum, we realized that creative writing could

enhance the transformative aspects of the learning experience. In particular, we felt that 55-word stories, with their emphasis on precision and expression, would be ideal.

In April 2000, “A Piece of My Mind” in *JAMA* introduced 55-word medical stories<sup>1</sup> in a piece written by two internists based on a book edited by Steve Moss and colleagues, *The World’s Shortest Stories*.<sup>2</sup> Two years later, “More Stories” was published.<sup>3</sup> Stimulated by these stories, we included 55-word stories as well as poems in our Medicine and Literature activities. This past year, for the first time, we specifically directed that the stories reflect on fellows’ experiences in care of the underserved.

As usual, we met to share our stories and discuss our reactions. Fellows and fellowship faculty (some of whom wrote their own stories from previous experiences) agreed that this was a powerful exercise, so much so that we presented our stories at a full faculty meeting

---

(Fam Med 2007;39(3):169-70.)

and encouraged the broader faculty to write stories of their own.

Some stories are more like poems, but all are 55 words and clearly reveal the impact of these experiences:

### 9th and Carson

Twelve patients in a waiting room small enough for four. A young man whispers his sexual history while a makeshift partition away another man tries hard not to listen. A free medicine cabinet, expired lidocaine, a psychiatry consult in a closet, falling plaster. The United States spends over \$1.7 trillion on health care.

*Tapan Kant, MD*

*Faculty Development Fellow*

### I Had No Idea

He said the Zantac helped his heartburn. The house was quiet when she came home. He had no other complaints. The steps to the attic were lowered. His exam was normal. He was on a rocking chair. He thanked me and shook my hand. He put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

*Tapan Kant, MD*

*Faculty Development Fellow*

### i have Saved the world

stars have aligned themselves above in the Cold nigHt. The presIdent knowZ who i am... so i camOouflaged myself by the dumPster. as the conspiracy grows, my mind connects tHem all together. i am the key to a fRagmented Ex-isteNce.

I must hide to sAve the world from its own destruction.

*Steven Wolfe, DO*

*Faculty Development Fellow*

### Alone

Elderly, frail; thinning gray hair in cornrows; quietly dignified. No diagnosable malady, just old age. Her time had come and we both knew it. They told me to order another test. She just wanted to go home. But, she endured our unwillingness to give up, only to die on the transport stretcher. I wept alone.

*Sandra Sauereisen, MD, MPH*

*Faculty*

### Missionary Medicine

Every six months the people come to see *El doctor Americano*. They share their pains from the prior 6 months and those they fear in the next 6 until *el doctor* returns. I am *el doctor*. I heard these complaints six months ago. I hope to make a difference. I fear it's a revolving door.

*Philip Pritchard, MD*

*Faculty Development Fellow*

### The Smallest Piece

Words spoken. Hands shaken. Pleasantries exchanged. Talking, listening. Questioning. Examinations. Explanations. Expectations. Testing. Waiting. Prescribing. Forced smiles. Insincere nods. Agreeing to plans that won't be followed. Treating diseases that can't be cured. An unsatisfying visit. Asking permission; touching his shoulder; praying together. Only seconds. The smallest price. The smallest piece? "Thanks doc. That really helped."

*Jackie Weaver-Agostoni, DO*

*Faculty Development Fellow*

### fighting the god fight

Struggling less and less and less. Praying none, for fear God would help her. Dreams gone of liberation from her white master she hates, but has elevated. She bows: genuflect-ed-head down-eyes closed-nose open "Sell all you have to follow me," he beckons. "...i...will..." she snorts her all powdered god.

*Stephen Wilson, MD, MPH*

*Faculty*

*Acknowledgment:* This article was supported in part by HRSA grant 1D55HP05162-01-00.

*Corresponding Author:* Direct correspondence to Dr Merenstein, UPMC St. Margaret, 3937 Butler Street. Pittsburgh, PA 15201. 412-622-7343. Fax: 412-621-8235. merensteinjh@upmc.edu.

### REFERENCES

1. Scheetz A, Fry ME. The stories. *JAMA* 2000;283:1934.
2. Moss S. The world's shortest stories. Philadelphia: Running Press Book Publishers, 1998.
3. Christianson AL. More stories. *JAMA* 2002;288(8):931.