There Are Tears of Things (Why I Write)

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Writing is a way of telling others about the things I have seen along the way, the moments that make me feel suspended in time—images and emotions that may last only seconds but stay forever. My college teacher called them “existential moments,” and William Carlos Williams referred to them as “some rare thing” that rises up in the midst of talking with patients. Whatever it is, it happens often enough and with enough power for the image or the feeling to stay with me until I write about it. I suppose writing is a form of personal exorcism.

Each of us has a teacher who turned us toward something that we secretly longed for but were too embarrassed or too reluctant to try. Frank O’Malley was my literature teacher my first year in college. Each week, he asked us for essays about “things” for the next class. He would point to a tree and say “Write about that,” or say “Write about something you remember.” After we read a book or an essay, he would say “Write about that” with no further instructions. He understood Williams’ famous dictum “no ideas but in things.” He was encouraging and used a great deal of red ink, scrawling “terrific” or “really works here” on mediocre pieces of adolescent angst. The world, then, was not as large as it is for young people now. It was the first time away from home for many of us. I was reminded on a daily basis that there were smarter, more agile, more talented students all around me. I felt a constant temptation to bolt for home.

I turned in an essay that, as I look back on it now, was my attempt to describe the fear I felt in that strange place and how much I longed for a life that felt safer and more secure. Those intersecting feelings became a story about my grandfather and the farm where I spent weekends growing up. Mr O’Malley had me stand up and read it to the class, the one that was full of guys much smarter and braver than me. Then he handed me the essay, on which he had written “This is your realization of ‘sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangent.’” The line is from Aeneid and translates “There are tears of things and mortality touches men’s minds.” My teacher not only understood what I was trying to write, he told me I should be a writer. Over a 40-year teaching career, he undoubtedly told lots of young men they should be writers, but at my new life was beginning, it was important that someone believed in me.

“There are tears of things” reflects on the terrible price of war, of loss, of mortality and is a fitting phrase to keep in mind during a career in medicine where every day one sees examples of things that touch our minds. If someone asks what doctoring is about, what teaching is about, what community and living a life is about, for me it is about the tears of things that come from patients, students, neighbors, friends who let us into their lives with openness and vulnerability. Teaching is one form of passing that along and writing is another.

My most important teachers in life have all been readers. Mr O’Malley’s reading list was famous for resurrecting 19th century philosophers, obscure Russian novelists, and introducing us to Virginia Woolf. Since so many of my teachers have been writers as well, the message became if one wants to write, one has to read. Writing became an extension of reading. And the books that I will not recycle are the ones that contain phrases that move me and, in their own way, have changed me. I am a quote monger by nature. I always believe that someone has said what I am struggling to write better and more movingly than I can. Books and articles are the footprints on my journey. It helps, periodically, to look at the pages I have dog-eared over the last half century to remind myself of who I was and who I still am.

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Finally, writing is a way of engaging in conversation. The daily work of medicine and teaching is primarily one on one. But we are a part of something much larger than our individual work and differing points of view about those larger issues are essential to moving forward. Scholarship is grounded in wanting to know the how or why of an idea but, more importantly, writing about one’s work is a way of contributing to a conversation based on experience, vision, and history. We write to document experience and to inform the future. Writing is both a legacy and a hope and one way we hand each other along.

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References