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.

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main... Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in Mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

John Donne

There is a distinction between physical disease and a patient’s personal experience of illness. Seeing beyond the disease process into the window of human suffering is a fundamental skill that can help residents increase their empathy toward patients and bring meaning and fulfillment to their work. To enhance this skill, we teach a seminar utilizing a multimedia approach on finding meaning in illness and suffering.

Prior to the seminar, we ask the residents to read a chapter titled “Illness, Suffering, and Healing” from *A Textbook of Family Medicine* by Ian McWhinney, MD. In this chapter, McWhinney traces the power and authority of the healer to the traditional shaman and explains that the shaman’s power to heal and his/her status in the community is derived from prescribed training in two domains: a mystical experience that exposes the mysteries of life and formal instruction in the healing arts. The mystical experience often involves a life-threatening illness or a period of isolation from which the shaman recovers with new insight having faced the spirits and/or death and survived. This experience sets the shaman apart as a unique individual with both the practical knowledge and spiritual understanding to heal.

To illustrate the shaman’s power, we begin the seminar with a series of historical and cross-cultural slides featuring the healing arts. Our historical slides include an 1832 painting of Old Bear, a Native American medicine man pictured in traditional dress, followed by a photograph of a modern medicine man from Arizona, John Parrish, who was 104 years old at the time of the picture. With these pictures in mind, we read a selection from *Shaman* by Noah Gordon.

*Shaman* is a historical novel that describes the practice of medicine in America from the 1830s through the Civil War and chronicles the expulsion of Native Americans from Illinois. Gordon tells this story through the experiences of Dr Robert Judson Cole, a Scottish physician who settles in Boston, and his son, Dr Robert Jefferson Cole, nicknamed Shaman, who practices in Illinois. Another character central to the story is the Native American, Two Skies, who becomes the healer known as Makwa-ikwa. The selection we read with the residents...
describes the education and transformation of Two Skies into the healer Makwa-ikwa.

There are seven “Tents of Wisdom” that Two Skies must pass through to become a healer. Each Tent takes approximately 1 year to learn. During the first four Tents, she learns about herbal medicines, how to summon the spirits, the power of illusion/placebos, and how to care for the spirit of the dying. In the Fifth Tent she learns self-control and how to master pain. This prepares her for a mystical experience that involves isolation, physical mutilation, and surviving an encounter with spirits that appear as bears. Following this ordeal, Two Skies is renamed Makwa-ikwa, the Bear Woman. After 2 more years of training, Makwa-ikwa passes an oral exam by the tribal elders and becomes a shaman.

Residents are able to see many parallels between their training and Makwa-ikwa’s. Like Makwa-ikwa, they must endure long work hours, sleep deprivation, periods of hunger, and the stress of caring for sick patients. They could relate to Makwa-ikwa’s fears of the unknown and feelings about being separated from the rest of the community as a shaman. They also identified with the experience of receiving an additional name, Doctor, as recognition of their new status as a healer. We highlight for the residents how modern society shares the expectations of Makwa-ikwa’s culture that healers experience certain rites of passage before they grant them the power and authority to heal. Enduring medical school and residency is the price physicians must pay in our culture to be recognized as physicians.

McWhinney points out how the modern education of physicians emphasizes the scientific aspects of disease over an appreciation of the patient’s experience of illness and suffering. He states, “The central tasks of a physician’s life are understanding illness and understanding people. Because one cannot fully understand an illness without also understanding the person who is ill, these two tasks are indivisible.” (p. 83) To highlight this point, we show the first 5 minutes of the movie Wit and a brief segment from a documentary about the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who is referenced in McWhinney’s chapter.

Wit (2001) is an HBO adaptation of Margaret Edison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play. The movie opens with Dr Kelikian, a noted oncologist, informing Vivian Bearing that she has an “insidious, stage IV, ovarian cancer.” In cold, scientific language he explains the importance of treating her “full force” with experimental chemotherapy to prolong her survival and enhance medicine’s knowledge of her disease. She dutifully signs the consent and vows to be tough. In the next scene she is bald, wearing a baseball cap and laments that “I should have asked more questions.” We also learn that she is a “demanding professor of English literature” whose specialty, the metaphysical poetry of John Donne, has taught her all about life and death, except her own. After watching this brief video clip, the residents clearly recognize the distinction made by McWhinney between the training of physicians to see “illness as a set of signs and symptoms defining a disease state…” and the patient’s experience of illness “as a disruption of their ‘being in the world.’” (p.86-87) We also address the failings of the health care system to address Ms Bearing’s suffering, which leads us into a discussion of the work of noted psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1905–1997).

The Choice Is Yours is a documentary about the life and teachings of Viktor Frankl. In the documentary, Frankl, a Nazi concentration camp survivor, states his theory that humanity’s primary motivational force is the search for meaning. In a selected 6-minute segment, Frankl explains that meaning can be discovered in three ways: through work or deed, through love or experiencing someone’s uniqueness, and by the attitude we bring to unavoidable suffering or the opportunity we have to turn tragedy into personal triumph. The documentary illustrates Frankl’s theory by showing a patient who finds meaning in life despite suffering from cerebellum degeneration by reaching out to help fellow residents of a long-term care facility. The video clip closes with Frankl explaining that a person seeks self-transcendence by serving a cause greater than oneself or by loving a person other than oneself. He goes on to say that through service for the sake of a cause and by love of another person, one can become self-actualized. In many respects, Frankl personifies McWhinney’s description of the process of becoming a shaman because of his personal experience of suffering in a Nazi concentration camp, which ultimately inspired his approach to healing through the search for meaning. This powerful video enables us to discuss with the residents ways in which they may find personal meaning through their work as family physicians and how they can help their suffering patients seek meaning in their lives using Frankl’s concepts.

We close the seminar with the quote from John Donne that appears at the beginning of this paper as a final reminder of Vivian Bearing’s suffering in Wit and McWhinney’s use of John Donne in his discussion on the moral and spiritual aspects of healing. Following the seminar, we received feedback from a number of residents on the deep impact the curriculum made on them. The search for meaning in suffering and healing seemed to resonate with the residents in a profound way. The combination of art, photography, literature, and video to stimulate and enhance our discussion left a palpable emotional impact on our residents.
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REFERENCES