



Perspective/Opinion

The Healer's Art Course: Preparing M1 Students for What Lies Ahead

By Julie Owen, MD

"The core tasks... are helping the patient acknowledge, bear, and put into perspective feelings and painful life experiences."

- Glen Gabbard, MD (*Gabbard's Treatments of Psychiatric Disorders*, 2007) speaking about Elvin Semrad, MD, renowned psychiatrist at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center in Boston from 1956-1976, one of the nation's oldest psychiatric hospitals

By the time I entered medical school, I had built an almost decade-long career as a professional actor, performing in regional musical theatre productions around the country after completing my undergraduate degrees. By the time I entered medical school, my professional identity had been firmly established as an "artist," and transitioning to medicine precipitated a bit of an identity crisis. I happily discovered and immersed myself in the invaluable MCW Medical Humanities Program, recently [described](#) by Art Derse, MD, JD, in the Kern Institute's *Transformational Times*. A prominent component of this program is the **Healer's Art** elective course, introduced to MCW in 2007 by Dr. Derse and Julia Uihlein, MA.

[The Healer's Art curriculum](#) was designed by Rachel Remen, MD, and the course was first taught at the University of California-San Francisco (UCSF) in 1992. Since 1992, it has been offered annually as a fifteen-hour elective, and its reach has expanded to over 100 medical schools across the country. It is currently offered at all three MCW campuses.

The Healer's Art curriculum was designed as an antidote to physician (and medical student) burnout. As Bruce Campbell, MD, [noted](#) recently, a significant body of literature has demonstrated that empathy in medical students precipitously declines throughout the duration of their medical education. After medical school and training is complete, physicians not infrequently leave the practice of medicine, unable to maintain a sense of meaning, personal/professional satisfaction, and commitment to the profession.

Topics explored during the Healer's Art

The topics covered in depth by the Healer's Art course include maintaining one's wholeness, grief and loss, awe and mystery, and service as a way of life. Faculty physicians gather with M1 students in a "Discovery Model," process-based curriculum, in which the mutual sharing of personal experiences and beliefs create a unique professional support system and a safe space of "harmlessness" to explore these fundamental principles of life and of healing.

One of the core principles of the course is the concept of **generous listening**. Our medical education teaches us to listen analytically, to ask questions that will allow us to generate a differential diagnosis. Dr. Remen emphasizes that generous listening is practiced not to diagnose, evaluate, fix, or even to understand the speaker; rather, it is the practice of listening only to **know what is true** for another person and to **bear witness** to that moment.

As a psychiatrist, this brings to mind Dr. Semrad's characterization of our work with patients — to acknowledge, bear, and put into perspective the (often painful) experiences of our patients. When I hear medical students remark that they feel they have little to offer patients, especially in their most vulnerable moments, I hope educational experiences like the Healer's Art illustrate and nurture the tremendous power we all have as healers, no matter our level of training or practice, simply when we are present with the patient.

My own family's experience with an artful healer

My husband and I recently "celebrated" the five-year anniversary of his cancer diagnosis and treatment initiation. As an M3, he was diagnosed with a large right frontal lobe tumor, a grade II-III oligodendroglioma, after he had a grand mal seizure during the last day of his surgery clerkship rotation (he fondly recalls that day as "going out with a bang"). His neurologist called us into his office during the lunch hour the day after he had his MRI, the final piece of his outpatient seizure work-up. I remember walking into Froedtert Hospital from the parking garage thinking, "This is one of those life-changing days... and I will never feel this way (*read: blissfully ignorant*) again."

During one of the moments seared into my memory, I am sitting with my husband hearing the news we feared most, and his neurologist is sitting silently with us, tears in his eyes, as we took it all in. Bearing witness. Acknowledging our pain. That moment, more than any other from that whirlwind time period, is forever imprinted in my brain; this physician showed his compassion and his humanity merely by giving us the gift of his quiet. These are the superpowers of a true healer... ones we all possess if we have the courage to use them.

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The MCW Healer's Art course runs each year over five Wednesday evenings during January through March. Faculty who would like to discuss volunteering as facilitators can contact Dr. Owen through her MCW email address.