Lessons from Cadavers

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We didn't know their names,
we didn't see their faces,
we didn't say hello,
and on the first day of anatomy lab,
we stared at the bodies of 20 people with whom we would never share
a conversation,
but who would silently teach us so much.

Our faces spoke of fear, apprehension,
excitement, intrigue, and awe.
But in one way or another, we knew that meeting our very first patients
was a defining moment for us, as a class of future physicians.

At first, we learned the science:
reflecting the cold skin,
trying to find every fascial layer,
inspecting the connections between bundles of muscles,
loose strings of arteries and veins,
and clumps of lymph and fat.
The intestines were spread like an intricate fan,
and the greater omentum hung over the internal organs like an apron.

Then, we learned the medicine:
blocked biliary ducts,
anastomoses between arteries branching from the aorta,
symptoms of pinched nerves and atrophied muscle,
the part of the heart most commonly damaged in car accidents.
Finally, we learned the art: delicately maneuvering the tools through a most sophisticated creation, stepping back to envision and appreciate the incredible motion of an unforgettably flawless internal design.

But most importantly, as each anatomy session went on, my imagination ran ahead of me, and I saw my classmates not as studious medical students, but as future colleagues that will many, many times look at patients on operating and exam tables, racking their brains for clues and answers, just as they did in the anatomy lab. I saw my bright and ambitious friends as leaders guiding teams of medical professionals through surgeries and procedures, motivating others by their profound knowledge of anatomy with all of its elusive nuances and subtle anomalies.

It all started with generous strangers on our tables, in a common room, with a common purpose, and common knowledge to be gained. Emerging from these common experiences are the most extraordinary memories that we share as a class, and extraordinary lessons that will forever remain.