

Lessons from Gross Anatomy

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It was not until our second semester of medical school that we started gross anatomy. Finally, I became that quintessential medical student walking home too tired to change out of my formaldehyde-tinged scrubs. Over our many long nights combing through *Netter's Anatomy*, our grasp of the human body was theoretical and at best, based on one dimensional illustrations. Our specific preparation for anatomy lab was focused on direction, form and function. *The artery is medial to the nerve and lateral to the vein.* But I remember feeling anxious on our first day not knowing how it would feel to actually experience these otherwise textbook versions of one dimensional anatomical structures. The week leading up to our lab, multiple lecturers had talked to us in excitement about how our donors would be our first patients. I had gotten myself into a handful of philosophical conversations on humanizing our cadavers. *Were these simply more learning tools, resources listed under our core textbooks, or was there merit to thinking upon our cadavers' lives before their deaths?*

After all the anticipation, we finally stepped into the anatomy lab. The room was cold and sterile sending chills up my spine. Stainless, slate tables were lined up in rows with large hoods latched at the top. My heart raced as we opened the hood, and my knees clenched as we unzipped the black nylon to finally meet our cadaver. His eyes were closed, and his whole body, with a lifeless discoloration, was exposed. An unfamiliar emptiness dropped into my stomach; I wasn't sure how to feel.

My lab partners seemed giddy with a curious excitement. We looked at each other, nervously, not knowing who would make the first incision. With a fine tremor, I handed the scalpel to my partner, Erin. Her initial touch was so hesitant that she barely made it through the epidermis. As we followed the directions of our first dissection as precisely as we could, our hesitancy to cut, silly in retrospect, made our progress slow and tedious. But our constant curiosity made the hours pass quickly.

During our second gross anatomy lab, we exposed the heart. There it lay before me — the first real heart I'd ever seen. It was covered in fat and clotted blood, and it was larger than

I had imagined. Obviously, it sat in my hand not beating ... dead. Lifeless. Something in me shifted.

I think a thousand thoughts a day, but this thought jumped so pervasively to the forefront of my mind that it demanded more attention. *This world has nothing for me.*

In front of me lay a body as dead as can be. *This world has nothing for me.*

I am holding a heart that has not beat in months or maybe years. *This world has nothing for me.*

I could hear my heart beating, lub dub, lub dub, in my chest. *This world has nothing for me.*

I could feel my heartbeat in my eardrums. Someday it will cease. *This world has nothing for me.*

My heart was beating in my temples. *This world has nothing for me.*

Am I tachycardic? *Lub dub, lub dub.* My cheeks flushed, my heart pounded against my ribs. My body, vibrant and strong, would someday lie in a room, on a metal slate, surrounded by medical students oohing and aahing. *This world has nothing for me.*

My body, this body of mine, will return to the earth from which it came. My body will be gone. *This world has nothing for me.*

Nothing I do on this earth is mine, because my body, the only part of me which is tied to this world, will die. *This world has nothing for me.*

Thoughts swirled around my mind, and I realized that I was groping to understand this strange and unfamiliar thought that this world has nothing for me. What I knew for certain was that in a moment I was absolutely overwhelmed by the reality that my body, like this one in front of me, would one day cease to exist in this physical world.

After what seemed like hours, I looked up and realized only a few seconds had passed. My lab partners had no idea that I had shared this strange, intimate thought about our donor. They had no idea that this cold, sterile room, filled with smells and bodily fluids that usually made me cringe, had transformed into a sacred space.

I looked up at my lab mates not knowing what to say. Erin, with an uncharacteristic softness in her voice, caught my eye and said, "He has a gentle face, you know."

In the same moment, both of us shared the feeling that our cadaver had become our first patient. In very different, but tangible ways, he had reached through time and space and taught us something great and deep about humanity. With my lab partner's simple statement — *He has a gentle face* — I came to the realization of my unknown thought which is that there is something about the human life that carries on endlessly ... even after death ... perhaps, even beyond our physical world.

Any degrees, or publications, or titles or awards will be lost just as soon as my heart, just as this cadaver's heart that I held in my hands, stops beating. All that we have is the impression we leave on those who remain after us. The only thing that is everlasting, in this world, is the kindnesses we bestow on others. This sterile room was always filled with the kindness, empathy and humility of our own lives and our cadavers. In that moment, I had been led to realize that truth.

Perhaps, I am allowing my emotions to apotheosize the physical body. Perhaps. I am pulling ontological meaning out of science when there is none. Perhaps, I am simply spouting esoteric, eschatological rhetoric. I do not mean to make statements about life after death, religious or spiritual realities, or some grand moral responsibility. I am simply convinced now that when my body decomposes, then all my degrees and accomplishments will not matter anymore. What will be meaningful is the way that I reach outside of myself and impact others — just like my first patient did to me. I think only the dead could have ever truly taught me that life carries on, endlessly, even after death.