On Being a Catholic Physician

Letter to the man whose spirit once occupied our cadaver

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It was hard for me to see your body for the first time. An amorphous idea of you had been woven into my prayers for nights leading up to that August morning, and even now I was not sure that I was ready to put a form to the abstract person I had imagined. While our preceptors were giving us instructions, I was distracted, my thoughts anchored to the truth that this body of yours was a precious gift that I am not sure I would have the grace to offer to students like myself. How could I complete the inevitable cutting, cracking, and tearing I knew the little black text of my dissection manual would demand, when I felt unworthy and inept to perform the task?

Despite our eagerness to learn, I knew that my classmates and I had experienced so little of life that we could not possibly understand the magnitude of selflessness involved in donating the canvas onto which you poured seventy years of colorful life. So when my team and I lifted the shroud from your body, exposing this gift and the biological intricacies contained within it, all I could think about was how grateful I was to you in that moment. I gazed at your body the way that I would want students to gaze at mine—with respect

and wonder about all the ways in which it served you and through which you served others over the course of your life. Were you once married? Was this the body that your wife curled up against, finding comfort and security in the warmth of the skin that I would gingerly probe with my tools on this first day in lab? Did you have children and grandchildren who sat in your lap as you read to them? Did your eyes scour anatomy textbooks like mine or did you once gaze upon the destruction of precious life while at war? Did your muscles propel you to unprecedented athletic feats? Did your eyes remain stoically dry or shed uncharacteristic tears when you were told you had cancer?

I placed my hand on yours, holding it for a moment as I would want a loved one to hold mine. I wanted my first connection with you to be this action of comfort and love. This was my silent thanks to you for offering your body as the template on which our knowledge would grow exponentially. I was sorry that you were here on our table, having lived and died and been brought here to intersect with my life in this tenth floor room.

It was six months after this, almost to the day, that my cousin's young wife—just

three years older than I—rapidly succumbed to the cancer that had seemed to burgle its way into her life, stealing her vivacious curves over mere months and leaving a cachectic scaffold behind. When the end was nearing, her Colombian family flew up to Boston. Language barriers, cultural differences, and hysterical fear of losing a loved one created a chasm separating my cousin's wishes for his wife's final days from her family's demands that all measures be taken to prolong her life by days. While Adri's wishes to pass peacefully were respected by the medical team, I imagine that tension between her loved ones made her final days less serene.

While all this went on, I was coming into lab often, studying at night with a friend to prepare for our Homeostasis exam. With my mind occupied by thoughts of Adri, I would wonder whether your last days were littered with similar family strife. Did you slip into death peacefully? Did you succumb to delirium before crucial decisions had been made? When you passed, who was holding the hand on which I would later memorize the names of pearly white tendons?

When Adri died, my faith took a temporary plunge. I wrote a letter to her in the hospital days before she decompensated, and it arrived at my doorstep with "Return to Sender" scrawled in an administrator's handwriting on the teal envelope, unopened. Over the phone, my mom was unwavering from her characteristic glass-half-full outlook; she focused on the blessing that Adri was in Heaven. To this I snappily retorted, "I'm not sure that I even believe in Heaven anymore."

Medical school had transformed me in a way I never thought possible—I had become a fact-devourer who selected textbooks over her Bible for bedtime reading, and who insidiously had begun to value the explainable over the unexplainable, as though my ability to reason through

something was the only way to breathe truth into it. I had dissected a body that had experienced death; I had been elbows deep in your chest, touched the hard tumors that had taken your life, held your heart in my hands.... And in all that I had found no evidence of a soul. In my arrogance I convinced myself that if I had not seen it, then I should at least be uncertain of its existence.

My mom encouraged me to pray, to carve out time for reading Scripture, just as I schedule time to study. In simply closing my evenings with prayer, I began to view my own fledgling skepticism more critically. I realized I had been turning into doubting Thomas, demanding to see the wounds in Jesus' hands despite countless encounters with Him daily, at the hospital, with my classmates, and in my studies. In dissecting your body, I had been given a front-row view of God's handiwork. Yet I had buried myself so deeply in memorizing details and names of the parts that I hadn't taken a step back to appreciate the masterpiece that is the body as a whole. Where had my wonder, awe, and appreciation gone since our first encounter in August? Why had it become more probable in my mind that you and Adri had been simply neurons firing, beings extinguished at their body's demise rather than souls transported to Heaven via a route that my mind was not skilled enough to comprehend?

When we finally uncovered your face soon after Adri's death, I was surprised by your expression; rather than the look of fear and despair that I expected to be frozen eternally on the face of a one who has encountered their moment of death, your countenance conveyed the slight semblance of a smile. That peaceful expression assuaged my guilt and feelings of unworthiness to be prodding around your body and ignorantly debating the existence of an afterlife. You already know the truth

of what happens after death. Feeling affirmed by your unexpected peaceful expression, I started to see your body not as what was left “of” you, but rather as the house in which your spirit had once resided, and *from* which your spirit had now moved on. You were allowing us the freedom to discover and inspect the nooks and crannies of your earthly home from attic to basement. You withheld no place, no matter how treasured by you, from our unskilled scalpels. Thank you for inviting us, novice medical students whom you had

never met, into your home, and allowing us to explore places that you yourself never got to see. I can’t wait to explore your new home when my time comes.

With love and appreciation,
Samantha

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