

Nurturing the Heart and Soul of Medicine

When medical students commit to four years of challenging academic work, grueling schedules, and financial sacrifice, they often do it because they feel a calling: medicine offers an opportunity to serve humanity in a meaningful career. Can the rigors of medical school dampen that sense of purpose? Studies have indicated that this is the case, but there's a national movement afoot to help medical students retain their humanistic focus in medical school and beyond.

In the fall of 2005, the Boonshoft School of Medicine offered first-year students an inaugural session of The Healer's Art, a medical school curriculum designed by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., professor of family and community medicine at the University of California at San Francisco. Her workshops emphasize that meaning and purpose can be cultivated, strengthened, and shared with others to sustain the physician's commitment to serve. The curriculum is now taught in more than 50 medical schools around the nation.

John Donnelly, M.D., associate professor of family medicine and community health and a recipient of the Gold Foundation's Leonard Tow Humanism in Medicine Award, introduced The Healer's Art here through a \$398,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). "In the first year, students are spending so much time on the requisite scientific knowledge and clinical skills that they experience a loss in their original sense of purpose," he says. "This touches on things that don't get into the curriculum, or

are discouraged in some scientific or clinical settings."

The Healer's Art brings together medical students with practicing and teaching physicians, encouraging them to share their experiences, beliefs, aspirations, and personal values. Over five evening sessions, faculty and students have a series of conversations which focus on humanism, personal discovery and awareness, supportive relationships, and service.

The Healer's Art does require busy medical students to take time for introspection. Seethal Ja-

cobs, Class of 2009, says she signed up because "I was interested in taking a course that focused more on the ethical and social sides of medicine as opposed to the scientific and clinical sides we see every day in lecture. When the class began, I was surprised to find out that much of

the focus was on us as individuals. It was more of an opportunity for us to step away from our hectic lives and remember why we wanted to be physicians." Jeff Jenks, president of the Class of 2009, agrees. "The Healer's Art course provides an atmosphere where we can share experiences in a non-threatening and confidential environment. I learned a lot from these individuals, and I also learned a lot from myself as I went through The Healer's Art process."

Dean X. Parmelee, M.D., associate dean for academic affairs and a faculty member in the course, is pleased that the voluntary, not-for-credit course has been well received, with 40 students in the Class of 2009 applying for 20 course slots. The first participants were selected by lottery; this year, the course will be offered

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to the remaining students, and to the Class of 2010. “It’s a way to help students recapture the purpose and awe that they first felt when deciding to become physicians,” he says. “It addresses the conflict that can arise between being an expert, a technician, a scientist—versus being a healer and a humanistic being.”

S. Bruce Binder, M.D., associate professor and vice chair of family medicine and clinical curriculum coordinator, is the principal investigator on the HHS grant, and was among the first to attend The Healer’s Art Faculty Development Workshop in California. The workshop was an immersion

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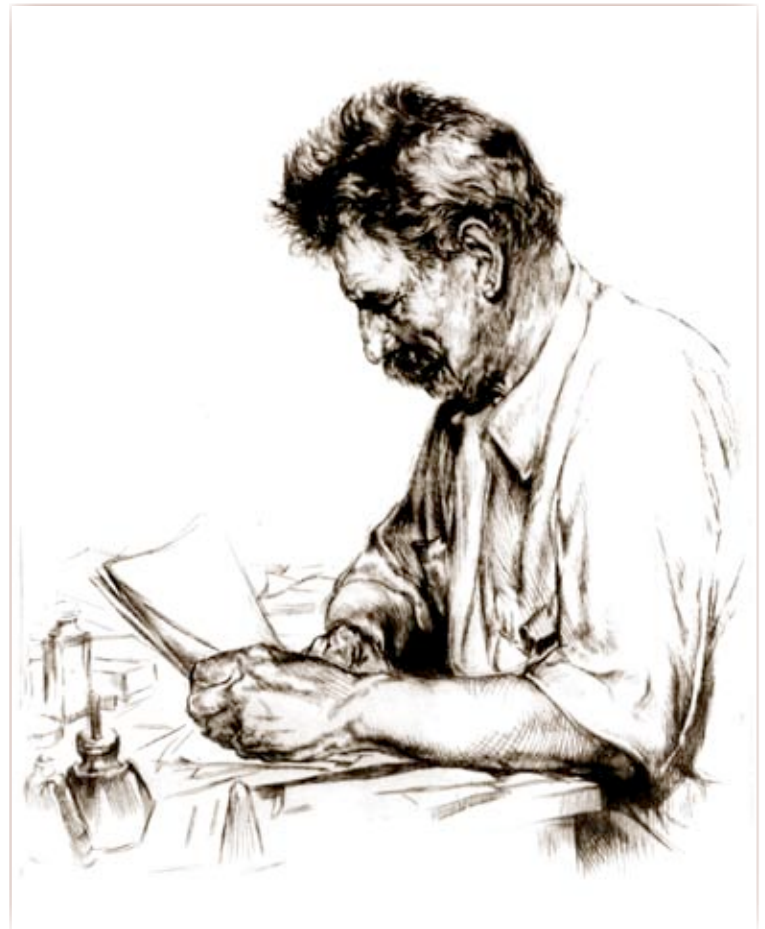
experience, requiring participants to explore the themes and elements of The Healer’s

Art in a quite personal way. Dr. Binder sees many potential benefits for medical students. “It shows them faculty who are willing to be vulnerable and reflective about the meaning of medicine, and also that it’s okay. It encourages them to look at the altruistic reasons that made them come to medical school. And those who have taken the course together may establish a supportive connection that lasts through medical school, or at least through the tough parts.”

Evangeline Andarsio, M.D. (’84), clinical assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology and of family medicine, became an instructor for The Healer’s Art through a bit of serendipity: her niece, Andrea Gonzalez, M.D. (’05), heard about the planned course and mentioned that her aunt was a

veteran of several workshops. Dr. Andarsio was, in fact, already sharing her experiences with other Dayton area physicians by starting an outreach program in February

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*“Grow into your ideals so that life cannot rob you of them.”
Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)—Physician, philosopher,
and recipient of the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize.
Etching by Arthur William Heintzelman from the collections
of the United States Library of Congress.*

2004 called Finding Meaning in Medicine. She believes The Healer’s Art program is not only beneficial for medical students, but also for future patients. “In The Healer’s Art, the students experience what it’s like to be really listened to. And through that experience they learn reflective listening. You can be so present to your patients, because you yourself have experienced what it’s like to really have been listened to.”

Students come away with a greater regard for personal balance in their lives, and also a greater sense of meaning behind their commitment to medicine. And that, says Dr. Parmelee, is why he supports The Healer’s Art. “My hope is that this will give them the tools they need to remain whole during medical school.”

—Sue Rytel