



# A gift undeserved

we spend with our donors. It just so happens that the passenger I sat next to that day was the son of an anatomic donor. He asked me to comment on the value of anatomic donations in an era where a multitude of technological alternatives might suffice. Over the two-hour trip from Charlotte to Chicago, our discussion transformed into a profound personal reflection. My feelings of debt towards him and his family allowed me to share my experiences in an honest and explicit manner.

I proceeded to tell him that I could speak for hours about the beauty of the human body: the way the different organ systems align, cross over, and integrate to form a stunning work of art. I could go on about the physiology, the mechanisms by which life is started and maintained, until eventually coming to an end. I could list the structures, muscles, bones. The journey a single signal will take to travel from the tip of one's finger to a particular point in their brain.

I could also discuss the uniqueness of each human body, specifically the differences between each of our anatomical donors. Some days I would wonder what they had experienced in the bodies we so delicately yet invasively explored. What was the story behind each scar, each piercing, each tattoo? I described in detail one donor's fingernails, still painted in colors boldly supportive of our



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After stowing my carry-on in the overhead compartment, I took my seat next to a middle-aged man. With introductions and small talk out of the way, he asked the question, "So what do you do?"

As a medical student, many people ask me to describe my everyday experiences in school. Often, they are intrigued with the idea of anatomy lab and the time

university. I could spend hours, days even, talking about this. And yet, if I only focused on these aspects, he would still not understand completely the essential gift given to us by our donors.

In talking with him, I decided to break from convention and impress a more personal truth. The career of a medical student is at times glorified to those outside the walls of our institutions. Yet as a doctor-in-training, internal struggles are often much louder than external perceptions of excellence and prestige. It was by discussing this truth that the real value of each gifted body was revealed. The first year of medical school was a challenging and self-critical transition. Throughout the excitement of getting accepted and wearing our white coats for the first time, many of us didn't realize the implications of learning about the entire human body in a short 13-month curriculum. Sitting on that plane, I would have been dishonest to reiterate the beauty of the human body without sharing that on most days, my mind would jump to feelings of inadequacy, rather than those of gratitude I felt towards our donors.

There were many days when I was not fully prepared for our anatomy sessions. There were mornings in lab that I worked completely dependent on my classmates asking for help every step of the way. During the musculoskeletal sequence, I had memorized the whole upper and lower body origins, insertions, and actions in the early hours of the morning before the practical exam the same day. It's not to say I was not trying, more that I was trying as best as I could, and at times could not keep up.

This is when the feelings of shame and disappointment would creep in. I would often imagine myself a donor, and wonder: "Is this a student I would have picked for my body?" Some days the answer was no.

I then told him that as the year went on, and we survived this unknown world of medicine, the bigger picture slowly came into focus. We are not doctors. We are students. And our donors did not give themselves to doctors, but to students. This is the true beauty, the true gift: the understanding

that to take care of thousands in the future, we must first spend the time being flawed. Being, at times, unprepared. Being willing to learn without judgment and without guilt. To learn in a space where forgiveness is given unconditionally, so that we can learn to care for our patients unconditionally. Perhaps our donors had known this all along – perhaps this was their goal. And perhaps their gift was not to us medical students, but to their own families, their own friends, and their own communities that we will be serving for many years to come.

When our airplane reached the gate, I thanked him for listening, and he thanked me for my honesty. Waving goodbye at the luggage carousel, my only hope was that he was more at peace with his father's decision and, if anything, that he could understand that a gift undeserved is often the gift most needed.

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