

**To the medical students who dissect my body:**

I am donating my body because I want the end of my life to represent a new beginning for others. I've read the poem in the pamphlet about body donation and it makes sense to me. I want to turn my remains into knowledge for the next generation of healers. I have been bedridden for the last several months—what I know are my final ones—and, as much as I believe in the significance of what I've decided to do, I'm happy just to know that I will be able to do something for others again. It is difficult to look back on the final actions of a lifetime because they will undoubtedly be less profound than hoped: I bathed, I made tea, I complained to my friends and family. But while those may be my final acts before I die, they won't be my final accomplishments—the knowledge that you gain from my body will live on.

I expect your time with me to be profound. I expect you to wonder who I was and what my life was like. I expect you to wonder what finally did me in and what went through my mind when I decided to donate my body. I expect you to wonder if I had a family and what they thought of my decision. I expect you to wonder what it felt like to live in my body, whether I had a kind heart or a fiery temper. I expect you to be delicate: treat me as you would your grandmother. I expect you to be serious and to learn something you did not know each time you touch me.

The day will come when my body will lie upon a white sheet neatly tucked under four corners of a mattress located in a hospital busily occupied with the living and the dying. At a certain moment a doctor will determine that my brain has ceased to function and that, for all intents and purposes, my life has stopped.

When that happens, do not attempt to instill artificial life into my body by the use of a machine. And don't call this my deathbed. Let it be called the bed of life and let my body be taken from it to help others lead fuller lives.

Give my sight to the man who has never seen a sunrise, a baby's face or love in the eyes of a woman. Give my heart to a person whose own heart has caused nothing but endless days of pain. Give my blood to the teen-ager who was pulled from the wreckage of his car so that he might live to see his grandchildren play. Give my kidneys to one who depends on a machine to exist from week to week. Take my bones, every muscle, every fiber and every nerve in my body and find a way to make a crippled child walk.

Explore every corner of my brain. Take my cells, if necessary and let them grow so that someday a speechless boy will shout at the crack of a bat and a deaf girl will hear the sound of rain against her window.

Burn what is left of me and scatter the ashes to the winds to help the flowers grow.

If you must bury something, let it be my faults, my weaknesses and all prejudice against my fellow man.

Give my soul to God.

If by chance you wish to remember me, do it with a kind deed or word to someone who needs you. If you do all I have asked, I will live forever.

—Robert Test, "To Remember Me"

## *Posthumous letters*

**Ryan M. Zimmerman**

The author is a member of the Class of 2009 at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

### **To the cadaver I am dissecting:**

From the first time I met you, I knew that what has happened to your body is not what you expected. You are naked, in a bag, your head has been shaved and a tag on your ear identifies you. I've seen the brochures about body donation. I've read the poem on the back of the pamphlet that encourages you to donate your body. I've read the sheet that you signed to donate your body. Did you think only of the nobility of donating your body, but never of the reality? Did you donate your body to spare your family the expense of the funeral? Would you have made the same decision if you had known what it meant to be dissected?

I made the first cut into your body and it was both daunting and exhilarating. But within a week, cutting and probing you were routine. I skinned your face to examine the muscles that made you smile and frown. I used a saw to cut through your ribs and a chain to hold your ribs over your head like a trapdoor. I found your birth defects. I found what probably killed you. I found plaques of fat in your arteries and scars on your skin. I used a saw and chisel to take out your brain. I held your brain in my hands. I slit your wrists to look at your joints. I leaned on you too hard and accidentally broke a rib.

Older medical students give the younger ones advice about how to deal with the smell in the anatomy lab: cover your head so it doesn't get in your hair, separate your lab clothes and your normal ones into different lockers, and wear two layers of gloves. Other students bring in air fresheners, the pine-trees tags that dangle from rear-view mirrors. Many students wear masks and one girl had to drop the course because the fumes aggravated her asthma. I know that you hadn't expected your body to become something against which people protected themselves. You viewed it as a gift, and, in part, we view it as a hazard.

I expect that your decision to donate your body was a very personal one. But here you lie on a hard metal table, one with a hole to drain excess fluid and a bucket underneath to catch it, in an orderly row in a brightly lit room with thirty-two other naked and ear-tagged strangers. I hope we don't disappoint you. We are all serious about learning and serious about taking advantage of the opportunity and privilege of dissecting another person's body. But there is also levity and camaraderie. Stories and jokes are told over your body as we work. We've given you a name: Ethel.

Why do I feel the need to confess to you? I want to acknowledge what I have done, not that I feel any shame or believe that I have done anything wrong, but just to admit that you have helped me achieve a key step in becoming a physician. Beyond learning human anatomy, I have learned a great deal about myself. As I studied your body,

I became more aware of the potential that lies inside me. I always thought that I was capable of taking another person's life into my hands, making life-altering decisions, acting bravely to face challenges despite great risk. You've shown me that I am ready to do those things. As I tell you all that I've done, I realize how I would never have believed it myself several months ago. You taught me to become comfortable with death, to probe into new and unknown territory skillfully and meticulously, and to rely on my abilities. Each of us influences others throughout life, but few have such profound influence after death.

Why do I need to acknowledge that what has befallen your body is not what you expected? It is because through this you have taught me another great lesson: You have shown me that the ability to live and work with uncertainty is a crucial part of life and integral to being a successful physician. Each dissection brings uncertainty, which causes some students to grind to a halt and call for the instructor. But when I think about the uncertainty you overcame all through your life, culminating with your decision to donate your body, I realize that anatomy lab is as much about learning to chart new territory for myself as it is learning the anatomical structures. So I press on when I am not sure what I have found. I trust my ability to deduce my way through your body and I discover anatomical relationships that I would have missed had it not been for my uncertainty in searching for them. Only at the end, when I believe the mystery has been solved, do I call for the instructors. I no longer ask them to simply check my work. Now I ask how I should have approached and worked through the problem. You have taught me that uncertainty will be a fundamental part of my life's work and my personal life. I must acknowledge life's inherent uncertainty and use it to my advantage by becoming more careful, analytical, and thoughtful.

Despite knowing you so intimately in death, it seems ironic that I can only imagine you in life. If I had known you, I would have wanted to thank you in advance for your unselfish gift. You have given a total stranger one of his greatest experiences and taught him some wonderful life lessons. In hindsight, the poem in the body donation brochure now makes sense: Death can be as much a new beginning as it is an end. Each cadaver passes a torch to its students, imparting knowledge, introspection, and understanding of the challenge and importance of becoming a physician.

The author's address is:

12 South Ann Street

Baltimore, Maryland 21231

E-mail: ryan.zimmerman@gmail.com