

A letter to my cadaver

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Before we went in to see you, our mentors prepared us. It seemed like a lifetime ago since they had been in our shoes. The feelings, I am told, have stayed the same between generations.

“You may feel uncomfortable. You may feel excited. You may feel nothing at all. All of that is normal; either way, we are here for you,” they explained.

Despite the forewarnings, when I met you, I felt something I was not prepared for: It was not sharp and overt, but rather dull and unyielding. Shame. A wave of guilt knocked the wind from my sails as I struggled to portray professionalism and placidity. With cloudy vision, I went through the motions. I made the cuts where I needed to make them. I identified the anatomical landmarks. I tried in vain to wash the smell of blood, guts, and formaldehyde from my skin.

I did not think about you when I went to class. I did not think about you when I studied the thousands of things that could go wrong with a human body. I did not think about you as I drifted to sleep. I only thought about you in my dreams. At night, I peeled back the layers of your fat and fascia to uncover not muscle or bone but something more: your soul.

In my dreams, I saw your strong muscles and the family they supported. You had a litter of children and grandchildren who looked up to you with doe eyes as they learned to navigate the world. With ample care and little judgment, you held their hands, put food in their bellies, and shared your wisdom.

I saw your hypertrophied heart, filled with love and connection. You loved and were loved fiercely during your life, and even in death. Like us all, you experienced heartache and loss, but you persisted. Your resilience and compassion were something to be admired.

Then, you were with me, a young man who knew little about medicine, life, or even himself. I was far too underqualified and undereducated. Taking care of you, even in death, was too much for me to bear. You were a force of nature during life, and the sacred practice of cadaveric dissection was wasted on me, an imposter. I needed to delve into your body with precision and respect, and one wrong move could create irreparable damage to you. I could not bear the thought of that, much less being the one responsible. How could I compare to the brilliant minds I brushed shoulders with? They deserved the privilege to see someone at their most vulnerable, not me.

Suddenly you were gone. Before even seeing your face, a whirlwind struck, and the world fell into sickness. Our journey together came to an end. It has been a year since we last met, and looking back, I have regret. Our time apart has forced me to delve deep into myself and address my self-doubt.

While I still have room to grow, medicine is a field of iterative learning. I will never know all the answers or be the best person in the world to do a procedure or make a diagnosis, but I must provide the best care with the tools I have right now. You trusted me to do the best that I could do. I should do the same.

You have been my most important teacher thus far. Even in death, you reminded me of the capacity of humans to trust. You believed in me unconditionally. I imagine you will be the first of many. Thank you for your gift. I am sorry that I felt too unworthy to receive it at the time, but I promise I am accepting it now, even from afar.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Jeevan Karamsetty for his continued support.

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