

ART AS A WAY THROUGH SUFFERING: EMBODIMENT IN MEDICINE

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It was just another Wednesday morning in one of the largest intensive care units in the country. I held my still-warm chai in my hands, hoping it would carry me through the call shift. As I pushed open the heavy ICU door to my sickest patient's room, there was a middle-aged mother suffering from progressive respiratory failure from years of lung and heart disease receiving invasive mechanical ventilatory support. Although she was surrounded by lines, tubes, drips and machines, she seemed so alone and sad, and my eyes settled on a notepad resting on the windowsill. The blinds cast shadows across the floor, interlaced with the thin rays of sunlight that sneaked between them. The room was filled with monotonous shades of cream, grey, and blue, with hints of sage green, colors intended to soothe yet somehow served as quiet reminders of illness and vulnerability.

Her handwriting evolved over the creased pages, there were entries in steady script while others seemed abrupt and trailed off mid-sentence. One note described her fear of leaving her son behind. Another reflected frustration at being unable to communicate. As I stood there reading, I became aware of my own body, the tension in my neck, the firmness of my grip on the paper, the heaviness settling in my chest. These pages allowed me to glimpse the uncertainty that accompanied her illness, as well as the hope that gave those experiences meaning. She was no longer simply the patient with severe respiratory failure. She was a person trying to make sense of what was happening to her.

Throughout my training, I learned to notice subtle trends such as the few millimeter lung nodule and fine breath sounds. In sharpening this attention, I was afraid I had begun to lose another: attention to what could not be measured such as the way illness reshaped the life beyond the hospital room. My jaw unclenched, my fingers relaxed, my breathing slowed. I stayed with the page a little longer than I normally would have. The silence no longer felt like time I was wasting. It felt necessary. Looking at a canvas taught me to stay with uncertainty, and standing beside her journal, I realized I was doing the same thing. Instead of asking what diagnosis or intervention came next, I ran my fingers over the indentation her pen had left in the paper and imagined the effort it must have taken to press those words onto the page while struggling for breath. The monitors and ventilator screens were cold, smooth, and unyielding. The paper beneath my fingertips was creased and soft from repeated use, her handwriting uneven where exhaustion had interrupted her thoughts. In a room crowded with machines, it was those human textures that caught my attention.

Our medical training has always taught us that efficiency is paramount. Art has taught me another way of looking. It encouraged me to pause long enough for details to emerge such as the words she crossed out before trying again, the way fear appeared over and over while anger never did. None of these observations changed the ventilator settings, but they changed the person I believed I was caring for.

I carried the notebook into rounds and handed it to my residents. The room grew quieter as each person read a few lines. Conversation drifted away from reports of ventilator settings and laboratory values toward the young son waiting in the hall, and the woman in the room enduring the silent turmoil. Her journal gave us a language for empathy. It reminded us that even when a patient cannot speak, they continue to communicate. I wondered then about the patients who have no journal to offer us. Art had taught me to slow down and look more closely, and perhaps the same attention could help me recognize what patients communicate without words, through gesture, silence, and the traces of a life surrounding the hospital bed. As I read her words aloud, my chest tightened and I slowed without meaning to. On the drive home, that heaviness had softened, replaced by the quiet reassurance that we had tried to find a connection.

That evening, with a pencil and paper, there was space to exhale and feel lighter. I was not trying to reproduce her face or tell her story exactly. Instead, I found myself tracing the feeling of holding those pages, the weight in my hands, the pauses between her words, the quiet loneliness of a room filled with machines. I began sketching the room, the looping ventilator tubing, the intravenous lines crossing one another, the careful order hidden inside what first looked like chaos. As the pencil moved across the page, I realized the nurses had created that quiet order every day, making space for care amid uncertainty. The act of drawing did not erase sadness. It allowed me to move through it.

Art has taught me to listen not just with my mind, but with my body, to notice tension, stillness, and hesitation, and to recognize that these too are forms of knowing. In medicine, I often carry patients in my

mind, leading to containment and unease. This patient taught me that stories can also be carried in the body. Art gave me a way to notice that burden, make space for it, and ultimately transform it into connection. When I draw or paint after a difficult day, the weight I carry gradually eases. The stories I could not leave behind begin to move instead of remaining trapped inside me. I began to see this as a newfound form of efficiency, not one that required more time, but one that changed how I moved through the work already before me. Art has become the place where I can carry my patients with emotion and, eventually, carry their stories more gently.

Confidentiality Statement

The patient provided consent for me to view the notebook and to share its contents in a reflective piece, although the eventual scope and form of the piece had not yet been determined at the time. Through this work, I have sought to honor the significance of the patient's journey while safeguarding their privacy through the removal or modification of potentially identifying details.

Biographical Note

Medha Cherabuddi is a third-year Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine fellow with an interest in pursuing a career in academic medicine. A lifelong artist, she has been painting since elementary school and particularly enjoys travel sketching. Her artwork has been exhibited in Hyderabad, India, and her visual and reflective works have appeared in various journals featuring narrative medicine. Outside of medicine, she finds joy in documenting everyday moments through photography and gratitude journaling, recreating South Indian family recipes, and planning meals for busy weeks in the ICU. Her creative practice continues to shape how she approaches observation, reflection, and connection in medicine.