

Deeded Body Speech

Last fall, as I sat on a plane on the way to a friend's wedding, I had a lot to think about. You see, I had just begun physician assistant (or PA) school here at the University of Iowa, and my brain was full of new facts, ideas and perspectives.

Most notably, I was enrolled in a course called "Gross Human Anatomy," in which I had the privilege to examine the anatomy of a fellow human being, hands on. Of course, that "fellow human" was someone who had deeded their body to science so that students like me could learn important skills that will ultimately (and hopefully) help hundreds or thousands of others.

It had been a rigorous two months, so having a moment of quiet contemplation on the plane was like taking a breath of fresh air. You may think that Iowa would offer *plenty* of moments of quiet contemplation (quick pause), but even compared to Chicago, where I had just moved from, the pace of school was absolutely frantic! It was nice to escape the bubble of school and reclaim some "humanity" again after absorbing *so much* science.

At one point, the woman sitting next to me struck up a conversation. She asked me what I did, and I enthusiastically replied, "I'm a PA student at the University of Iowa!"

She was happy to hear it; she worked at the University, and her husband was a doctor there. I noticed a fleeting recognition--a flicker in her eyes--and she asked me if I was taking anatomy with the medical students. I said that I was, and she told me the story of her kids' long term nanny, their "Mary Poppins" as it were. She was a strong and *amazing* woman who had recently,

unfortunately, succumbed to cancer. [Remember any specific anecdotes she mentioned?]

While I certainly enjoyed her touching story, I wondered what in the heck it had to do with my anatomy class...

Her eyes leveled with mine, and her lip trembled ever so slightly. It turned out that her friend had donated her body to science, specifically to the medical program for the purpose of dissection.

“Do you think she is your donor?” she asked me, hesitantly.

I was a bit taken aback. We had been introduced to the idea of a “donor” by our anatomy professor, Dr. Pizzimenti, and had slowly and gingerly immersed ourselves in the scientific and instructive aspects of the course.

But to make a connection between the still, quiet, sterile anatomy lab and the image she had painted of this kind, jovial, happy woman, formerly brimming with life, brought a *host* of feelings to the forefront. Feelings of unease, certainly, but those were drowned out by a profound respect, wonder, and gratefulness. To hear a part of the story of someone who so graciously donated their body so that others might be saved in the future was like unveiling a key part of a very vexing mystery.

For weeks now I had wondered about my charitable donor. Who was he? What was his life like? Who loved him? Was he in the medical field, or a professor wanting to give back to his students one last time? Or perhaps someone distanced from the medical field- a musician, businessman or a

coach--but someone who simply wanted to help other people in the best way he knew how? I would never know, but I felt privileged to profit from his generosity.

Of course, this mystery might have cut both ways. Perhaps my donor wondered who might benefit some day from *his* gift. He might have wondered how far his donation might travel, not necessarily in geographical terms, but rather in terms of the knowledge that he would bestow upon us as students of medicine. Knowledge that would allow us and many others like us to help sick and suffering patients someday.

Because without a doubt, what we as students have seen and discovered by taking anatomy has given us a foundation, a context to someday soon treat patients. And as we spread out across the country and the world, that knowledge will spread with us, and light up like little city lights, one after another, all across the globe.

So I told my neighbor on the plane that unfortunately I did not know her friend. The mystery remained for her. But I thought later, after disembarking the plane, what if her family's beloved nanny *had* been my donor? What would I have said then? Would the conversation have stopped there? Would she have had questions for me? Not questions like "did she have good tendons?" but rather "Did her generous gift have an impact--a *real, tangible* impact?"

"Did her donation *matter*?"

And, had that been the case, and had she asked, I can safely say that I would have answered with an enthusiastic and unequivocal "YES!"

Today we are here to either honor our loved ones, or to honor those who gave us the gift of knowledge. But I think for many of us, we are also here to find out a little bit more about each other. By doing so, maybe we can unveil more pieces of the story of someone who meant, in different ways, so much to us. Thank you.