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HEALING AND THE ARTS: A POWERFUL METAPHOR IN TEACHING HUMANITIES

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ABSTRACT

For several years an interdisciplinary course called Healing and the Arts has been offered to undergraduates and medical students in a BA/MD program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Its stated purpose is to give students a theoretical and practical understanding of how the arts can be a healing force in people's lives. Healing is addressed in a broad sense that takes into account the larger factors of health and illness such as the roles and responsibilities of patients, the cultural perspectives of sickness and health and the influence of religious or moral beliefs and practices. The three units of the course are: 1) Art and Healing of Self and Others, 2) Art, Healing and Society and 3) Art, Healing and Spirituality. Each unit includes appropriate literature assignments and art experiences. Oliver Sacks' book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat*, provides numerous examples of healing through music, art, spirituality and the helpful understanding of care givers. Music such as requiems, the blues and the compositions of Andrew Lloyd Weber provide examples of healing in a different sense. Plays, read or attended, offer dynamic experiences. Artists such as Frida Kahlo provide examples of the relation of illness and healing to the creation of visual art. The many art related responses to the 9/11 tragedy show how society sought its healing. Students responses to the selections are evaluated through written papers and examinations as well as class discussions. The involved faculty members believe that by introducing students to the positive aspects of the arts and how they have been universally contributory to healing individuals, societies and cultures throughout time they are helping them learn the important balance between the knowledge and experience of the arts in their own lives.

Key Words: Arts, Drama, Experiential Learning, Healing, Health, Illness, Interdisciplinary Teaching, Literature, Music, Society, Spirituality, Visual Arts

HEALING AND THE ARTS; A POWERFUL METAPHOR IN TEACHING HUMANITIES

INTRODUCTION

The University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) has an established history of interdisciplinary dialogue about the importance of the arts and humanities in society. The goal of the school's medical humanities program is to help students realize that they can better understand the human condition through literature, the fine and performing arts and other humanities experiences and that the concept of healing is much broader in its scope than the diagnosis and the treatment of illnesses. This article will describe an elective interdisciplinary course that both liberal arts and health care professional students can choose. Medical students in the 6-year B.A./M.D. program are encouraged to include it in their curricula.

The course is called "Healing and the Arts" and its stated purpose is to give students a theoretical and practical understanding of how the arts can be a healing force in people's lives. Using the arts to promote healing is not a new topic for health professionals (e.g., Holleman WL, Bosisaubin EV and Winkler MG, Bloch S, Anderson C, Coles R, Jarrett P, Morris K, and Stanford AF). However interweaving the metaphors of healing and the arts throughout an entire course is quite unique. The course focuses on how healing can be supported by different experiences of the arts rather than centering on one kind of art as therapy (e.g., drama, poetry, art or music therapy).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1976, the Rockefeller Foundation convened a meeting to consider the roles of the arts in healing and therapeutic environments. "The Healing Role of the Arts," a narrative concerning how to define what the healing arts are and how they can best be employed in America, was published after this session. The point of commonality among all participants was that the arts are essential for well-being. Despite differing opinions in defining the healing arts, all participants agreed "art is an intrinsic attribute of human existence" (Rockefeller Foundation 1978).

Late in the discussion of the participants at the meeting "how to measure the value of the arts" became a topic of conversation. Several people expressed their frustration with being

unable to translate their personal experiences into hard data. Twenty-seven years after this study, the same problem exists in academic institutions across the country. When education and “assessment” co-exist the arts so often fall short because it’s difficult to test “empathy,” “positive healing,” and other aspects of artistic learning. (Rockefeller Foundation 1978). Unfortunately in medical education objective measurement remains one of the recognized goals, especially in determining what offerings are required in a curriculum. This should not prevent educators from trying to design more sensitive ways of determining outcomes. Another important area of conversation centered around “art beyond curing”, the notion that health care entails more than curing a specific disability. One participant said that “healing” goes beyond the institutional population and therapeutic healing is a continuum and should be reaching everyone, not just sick people who are in hospitals (Rockefeller Foundation 1978). As medical care moves out of hospitals into long term care facilities and homes this aspect becomes even more important.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The three stated objectives of the course are 1). To analyze the arts, how they function for individuals and society, what their various roles are, 2). To experience the healing force fully after gaining knowledge about the history and context of the arts, and 3). To develop empathetic responses to artistic mediums. The faculty seeks to help students “build bridges,” connecting their own lives with the art experiences. For many students today, particularly those trained in the sciences, experiencing the arts both intellectually and emotionally is a “brand new” experience. They need to ask what a work of art is about? They need to learn something about its history and how it can have relevance to their day-to-day lives. The course shows students things to look for as they view and/or experience the arts.

These goals of the course relate to what P. Anne Scott says in “The Relationship Between Medicine and the Arts,” that the arts encourage whole-person understanding as well as helping students to recognize and learn from individual patient experiences. She says that each of us contains within us both general and particular patterns and that the arts may stimulate insight into common patterns of response. Scott uses the term “enrichment of language and thought” and argues that literature and the fine and performing arts can enrich the language and thus the thought processes of healthcare providers in a manner which provides a wealth of concepts and ideas with which to think about healthcare (2000). Scott concludes her article by quoting RS Downie: “Medicine and art have a common goal: to complete what nature cannot bring to a finish.... to reach the ideal...to heal creation. If we are attentive in looking, in listening and in

waiting, then sooner or later something in the depths of ourselves will respond. Art, like medicine, is not an arrival; it's a search" (Downie, in Scott, 2000).

On the first day of the class, the questions: "What is healing?" and "What is Art?" are put on the board for students to explore. Students are then asked to think about an evocative image, something they've read or experienced. They are asked to describe the image visually and then to describe the physical sensations that are associated with it. Such an activity can be very useful, particularly when students are allowed to employ a personal voice in answering the questions.

So often when illness occurs the term "curing" is used instead of the term "healing". Whereas curing makes the assumption of a positive outcome, healing presumes a whole mind, body, and spiritual approach to well being. As already mentioned, healing is a broader, more inclusive term that takes into account the larger factors of health and illness such as the roles and responsibilities of the patient, the cultural perspectives of sickness and health and the influence of religious or moral beliefs and practices. The use of the arts as a primary unifying principle expands the healing concept and takes it beyond the realm of medicine, emphasizing the ways that the arts have served throughout history and continue to serve as positive mediums for healing.

The Healing and the Arts course is divided into three large units: 1) Art and Healing of Self and Others, 2) Art, Healing and Society, 3) Art, Healing and Spirituality. Within these larger units are a variety of choices such as the reading of *Oedipus*, *The King*, the viewing of Frida Kahlo's artwork and learning her life story and the reading of selections from Oliver Sack's *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* in Unit I; discussion of society's need for Requiems, the significance of the AIDS quilt and the importance of different kinds of healing views for cancer and AIDS patients in Unit II; and the search for personal redemption in Andrew Lloyd Webber's music, and spirituality in the art and ritual of Native Americans and many other ethnic groups in Unit III.

Obviously different faculty members and guest speakers bring their individual strengths and abilities to the course. For a more medical approach through literature Oliver Sacks' clinical stories in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* help students come to know this person who sees himself as both a doctor and healer and they then can re-evaluate their traditional way of interpreting a "good" physician. When students come to see that he is a careful observer and interpreter of human experience, they can compare these characteristics to the more traditional scientific approach to healing, e.g., giving a pill. Another example is physician Kate Scannell, as described in her book, *The Good Doctor*, who sees each patient as a "problem" that although she can't cure (since most of her patients in the early 1980s were dying of AIDS), she can try to heal.

Another story, Richard Selzer's *Imagine a Woman*, doesn't have a doctor as the central character, but a patient who is dying of AIDS. This patient seeks healing by attempting to heal herself but finds that many people and events around her provide the healing force. As she spends her last days alone in a small hotel, the proprietess, the waitress and another customer each see her personal needs and see that they are gently provided. They watch over her in quiet unobtrusive ways so she does not feel deserted. In these examples, literature becomes an experience of healing and shows the ways that traditional medical models often ignore the less tangible or practical aspects of healing self or others. If students read about such persons and how they can affect monumental change, they have models to heal themselves and others. Sometimes it is more effective to use a text that has no medical characters present to allow students to see that healing is universal and takes place outside of hospitals all the time. Healing so often requires more than medical care.

Plays can offer a more dynamic experience.. For example, when discussing *Oedipus, The King*, students can be persuaded to go through the process of identifying with the protagonist and feeling what a crowd of watchers would have experienced. A blues musician can help students understand the source and healing power of the blues and can then lead them in the creation and performance of their own blues lyrics. A more personal experience can occur when students do a live reading of the play, *Journey into the Good Night*, a story about a terminally ill college student who finds comfort and healing in poetry.

Since today's students are so diverse, it ~~was~~ has been a challenge to find a core experience to which all students can relate. This changed with the Sept 11th attacks in the United States. This shared experience has provided a powerful unifying metaphor that all students can relate to. A recent article in the New Yorker entitled "Requiems" by Alex Ross says: "What does music give us when words are stopped in our throats? On an ordinary day, music takes us out of ourselves, allowing us to forget whatever self-invented dramas may be pressing on us. The effect is seldom lasting. But when we are all in the grip of the same emotion, music can shoulder the heaviest part of what we are feeling." (2001) Other arts such as paintings, poems, photographs and short stories addressed this tragedy in their own ways and continue to do so.

As with many other activities in the course, the requirement of the written assignments is included to teach students how to look at a works of art and their relationship to healing. Special exhibits are chosen at nearby art galleries and plays which are being produced during the semester are recommended. Musical concerts can also be chosen. Students are required to attend and report on two such external art experiences. Response papers require a description of the experience and what personal meaning has been gleaned. There are three larger papers that draw

out some of the more interrelated themes of the course. There are also three unit tests, non-cumulative, which focus more practically on analytical understanding of material. There are identification questions as well as essay questions which require an analysis of the readings and material presented and discussed in class.

ANALYSIS OF THE COURSE

Faculty members believe that by first introducing students to positive aspects of the arts and how they have been universally contributory to healing individuals, societies, and cultures throughout time, and then allowing self-exploration, they are helping students learn the important balance between “knowledge” and “experience.” Without knowledge it’s difficult to understand another’s or even one’s own experiences.. Without experiential connection to topics, it’s difficult to convey to students a genuine understanding of how the arts can be a healing life force. When dealing with health and illness, it is important to give students (e.g., future or current patients and healers) a battery of resources.. If, for instance, some persons are organizing a support group, they may need to choose a play, music, art work, or literature that will be most effective in focusing and sharing experiences.

Many people argue that there is an even greater need for healing today since people in a global economy tend to be segregated and less connected, connecting to their computers, gadgets, and television sets more than to each other. In the field of health, particularly, many people argue that the skill of whole body healing has been lost in the obsession with medical technology and the scientific approach to healing. This course provides one avenue for educators to remind students that the arts offer another way to tap into positive modes of healing. It’s important to educate ourselves and our students about creative and healing forces and to recognize how we can use these tools to help us respond to our own pain and suffering and that of others.

CONCLUSION

The arts have always functioned as a positive method for healing the mind, body, and spirit. The main purpose of the described course is to help students become acquainted with many different worldviews of healing. A further goal is to get pre-health and healthcare students to step away from their isolationism to see the larger humanistic picture of health and illness. Sharing the class with non-medical students offers an unusual opportunity to enlarge their experience. When students connect to the mainstream of people and human experiences, they find that health and illness are larger themes that encompass society. Since healing does not -

always mean staying on the side of life, but letting go of our need to control, it helps students to talk about something other than maladies. It helps them talk about a healthy version of persons, which may lead each person to find his or her own wholeness. Faculty who have participated in this course feel that when students have understood concepts conceptually and analytically, they are enabled to experience the practical and experiential components of healing. Thus an attempt is made to convey knowledge about healing concepts first, before allowing students to explore these artistic mediums on their own through reading, writing, discussing and experiencing.

As the course has evolved, the faculty has chosen to center the course around "positive" examples of healing rather than getting bogged down on the "limits" to healing, especially in relation to creative souls and the pain and suffering individual people, artists and non-artists alike feel. It is the intention of the course to help students experience the healing, ennobling, and enriching aspects of the arts while acknowledging that art, along with other human experience, has a shadow side. All human beings are artists to various degrees, since they create and re-create their responses to the world. The faculty has encouraged students to gather personal skills that they can utilize in their day-to-day lives

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