

**DOCTORS AS WRITERS****Serge Liberman**

In my fifth-year as a medical student, I spent an inspirational fortnight attached to an exemplary general practitioner in Horsham, exemplary both as a doctor and as a human being. I had also, not long before, read Albert Schweitzer's *From the Primeval Forest* and had hung up a framed photograph of the man in my study as a kind of mentor. These two things came together as I was returning by train to Melbourne when a sudden impulse came to me, which finds its way into the very opening paragraph of the story titled "Africa" included in my latest collection of stories, *Where I Stand*:

Africa had appealed to me most, Central Africa what's more, where, as soon as my internship was over, and in emulation of my mentor in spirit Albert Schweitzer, I would work in a primeval forest of my own, and treat malaria and yellow fever and dengue fever, and tropical ulcers, dysentery, infestations and meningitis, and immunise the natives against epidemics that had for decades-long decimated them by the multi-thousands.

As events later turned out, I never did get to Africa, that so-called dark continent, or, as Joseph Conrad called it, that *Heart of Darkness*, both as reality and as metaphor. After six years of post-graduate work in hospitals, I entered general practice, where I have remained ever since. But, as I write further in the same story:

And if I did not get to Africa, I had no need to do so. Africa was itself all around me, profound, dense and dark, dwelling in some form or guise in nearly every patient who passed through my door.

This Africa here represents the darknesses within ourselves – the inner forests, jungles and massed and tangled undergrowths of body, mind, emotion and spirit that have now for over forty years brought patients to me for alleviation, palliation, and healing of their ailments, - healing of conditions of a physical nature with heart disease, diabetes, cancers, infections and degenerative diseases at the fore; of emotional ones such as depressions, anxieties, panic disorders and alienation; the loss of self-mastery through, say, mental crises, psychoses and maniacal states; and their existential turmoils, the ones that the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote of as "fear and trembling", the inner dreads accompanying life and dying, the meanings that they seek in their lives, and their purposes, and matters of faith and absence of faith, and questions surrounding suffering and pain, and of their essential solitariness and anomie in the world - sore and challenging trials of the spirit that, I would venture to suggest, are at the core, each in his or her own way, of many of you sitting here and circuiting the larger world out there beyond these walls.

Of course, the doctor is privy too to the happier and more fulfilled and fulfilling dimensions of people's lives, as also to their aspirations, successes, achievements, recoveries and personal milestones and celebrations such as births, *bar* and *bat mitzvahs*, weddings, and is privileged to share these too with the patients who attend him.

What, however, as a doctor and a writer, has long stood out is the commonality of such themes and issues among very many others, to both medicine and literature, whether dealt through fiction, poetry, playwriting, essays or philosophical writings. What is more is that, of all professions extant, the doctor is in the front line in the insights that he may gain into people's innermost concerns and, as a would-be writer, is thereby directly informed by the multifarious details that make up of humanity from which he may his details with directly observed authenticity.

As doctors, then – although not exclusively doctors, of course – we are privileged people: both observantly and interactively exposed to a multiplicity of personalities, illnesses, emotions, beliefs, resiliences and weaknesses, spiritual and moral values, attitudes and behaviours across the whole spectrum of humanity. We are, to different extents – to use Martin Buber's term - in daily dialogue with people as we listen, respond verbally or react clinically to their personal, family, medical and other life-and-health-related stories, social and other health-related stories, with ourselves through long experience well attuned to issues which, integral to our work, permit us to draw out our patients in ways which, in other settings, could well be deemed gratuitously intrusive or, in social company, stuff not talked about.

A corollary of much of this exposure to the concerns of others is the effect upon the doctor as a human being himself and would-be writer himself to burrow inward and more compellingly within, leading him to reflect more

consciously into, say, the marvel of a new birth, the wonder of the pleomorphic child evolving as he grows and matures into an adult with a distinctive personality endowed with gifts and values of his own, the contemplation, in the way of Shakespeare's seven ages of man, of decline, aging, ailing and death – and for those so inclined, about what may lie beyond; in short, upon the doctor himself drawn into self-exploration, self-understanding and all that may arise in the process that, over centuries, have compelled him, each in his own way and his own ends to take up his quill or pen and now to sit before his keyboard, to bring into the light those tales that rumble within him, and which, although personal or individualized through his literary protagonists, reveal, manifest and expand upon human drives, experiences, dilemmas, apprehensions and relationships that are universally true.

This is perhaps why writers like, say, Chekhov, Bulgakov, Rabelais, Viktor Frankl and Oliver Sachs have been so popular, as one commentator wrote: “Not just because they are doctors, but because their stories and ideas go in and out—enlightening and engaging a reader from a number of diverse perspectives. It is thought that through their privileged and intimate contact with those moments of greatest human drama (birth, illness, injury, suffering, disease, death) physicians are in a unique position to observe, record and create the stories that make us human. ‘The clinical gaze (has) much in common with the artist's eye.’ In the light of this, I find it difficult – although not altogether impossible – for a dentist to be a writer, there being effectively minimal exchange between himself and his patient, or an architect, an engineer, plumber, electrician or locksmith, all of whose work is tangential to the inner life of the clients whom they serve.

All that I have said is but a summary lead-in or a launching pad for further discussion of the theme of the evening between ourselves and with you our audience.

Permit me to offer here one more thing: namely, to add a personal slant to the theme and illustrate in brief how medicine and writing came to me. In the very same year that I opted for medicine as a lifetime career, I was hit with a wallop to become a writer as well. I was in my Fifth Form in High School at the time, sixteen years old, and had, on the evening before Good Friday, watched the movie of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*. I was so gob-smacked by the play that I instantly vowed that, come what may, alongside medicine, writing would be something else that I too would do with my life. In the hold of Chekhov, Camus, Martin Buber, John Steinbeck, the American philosopher Walter Kaufmann, Franz Kafka, I.L.Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, Bashevis Singer, Franz Rosenzweig, Dostoevsky and others through whom I was already asking the existential questions that I hinted before, I took to extended reading, more reading and still more avid reading all manner of works and took my first tentative steps in writing – stories, poems, and assorted scraps that sounded profound at the time but which were in reality as sophomore as anyone neophyte could get.

First-year medicine, with its Physics, Chemistry and Biology, was a chore, but the second year from Day One hit me hard. It pounded me with another wallop that almost drove me from medical school altogether. For, never had I been so confronted to the core as I was then. The tiers of cold, stiff, cyanosed cadavers in the Anatomy dissecting room, compounded by the repulsive formalin acidity that permeated every corner of the hall saw me flee that room more than once. I detested it. I brooded ceaselessly over it and over its human display: with its deceased subjects having been alive and breathing but a short time before, but now dead, mute and gone forevermore from the world, this leading on to the harassing question “If this, if death is to be our fate, what is our flurry for, why are we here at all, what is our purpose, or our meaning, what can we reasonably believe, what part does God play – if God there is - in all this? “And, also, the old chestnut, why do good men often die young, and evil conniving men endure well into dotage?” And so on. Meanwhile, as I was tackling Anatomy, I had personal confrontations with Physiology and Biochemistry, arriving at a very mechanistic view of man, reducing his physical movements, and his cardiac, respiratory, secretory, eliminatory, visual, aural and other functions, to the similarly mechanistic mediation of his nervous and endocrine system, as also were his mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions, such as depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorders, and love, hate, anger, envy, joy, and more – in short, at the individual level, everything about the individual reducible to

molecular neurobiology, and everything at the wider social level to sociobiology, these perspectives coupled with dilemmas that arose from them.

These, along with my reading, my personal experiences, and the ever-extending contact that I have had with people in ways and depths unique to medical practice, have been the driving forces behind my literary work and have driven that work towards the exploration of themes inevitably experiential and existential – with the most pervading bared before doctors being such, as I touched upon earlier, as loom very largely, however they present to us, in people's day-to-day life; these driving forces which, having already seen the output of six collections of stories, still operating upon me now with a compulsiveness that has me create new characters, explore different experiences, dilemmas, conflicts, relationships, aspirations, failures, strengths and weaknesses, loves and disasters, and so much more that are the stuff of human living filtered through the doctors' imbibing and the writers' mind.