

Poem: Cadaver Anatomy – Learning Humanity

By James R. Carey, PhD, PT

Such brilliant architecture
Arches for protection
Feather-fibered muscles for power
Tendons tethered sharply to bone
Slippery sheaths to reduce friction
Pearly ligaments collaborating collaterally
Fulcrums, levers, pulleys and tunnels
All compactly contained behind veil now pale
Biologic beauty – yes, but where is the humanness

Look deeper they silently beckon to me
Past your science
Past our machinery
Seize our stories
Uphold our soul

I hear you and struggle at first
An impossible task, now, in your stillness
But perhaps not
I retreat from scientific training
And with mind wide open
I approach, I imagine and I see

Sturdy hips, hollow hips, metallic hips
That balanced you, advanced you
So many movements, so many miles, ever uphill
Nearly a century of stability, mobility
No wonder your weariness

Knees with thick cartilage, shallow cartilage, no
cartilage
That bore the weight
Of playmates tussling in the backyard
Of crippled comrades carried from fury in '43
Of postures bent and reverent, in supplication
No wonder your joint mice

Thick fingers, calloused fingers, crooked fingers
That tackled the shovel
And the fruit of the earth, despite the pain

Delicate fingers, caring fingers, color-tipped fingers
That tickled thimbles and threads
and backs and heads, of sleepy grandchildren

Brains once heaving with rolling hills of magical cells
That orchestrated fanciful dance, diction and dreams
And countless other thoughts unique to you
Now with narrowed hills and widened valleys
As genetic forces and merciless decades
Eroded your memories, appetite and pace
Still, in stillness you retain your grace

Abdominal walls with staples and stitches
Remind us of our many vulnerabilities
But most poignant are structures repaired
After the many lives you lovingly beared

And of course, your hearts
Some healthy, some enlarged, some mended
To extend the journey
Of repetitive pumping
Of unceasing pleasing, of others

And now, with all that done
You yield one last gift of selfless virtue
Your body to us
In awe, we learn anatomy
Higher, we learn humanity

About the Author



James R. Carey, PhD, PT

I have been honored to teach cadaver anatomy for 30 years. I understand that not all health care educational programs have the resources to use human cadavers and that computerized anatomical software can be effective for learning human anatomy. However, beyond the learning of anatomical and other clinical sciences in health professional education, there is an important need to learn and continually reflect on the humanism that forms the core of health care. Although there are many ways to address humanism in health care education, research and practice, experiencing cadaver anatomy as a foundational starting point is a treasure that needs to be preserved and promoted wherever possible.