

The Healing Power of Seeing—and Being Seen

By Sarah Blanton PT, DPT, NCS

“We miss more by not seeing than by not knowing.”

—Sir William Osler

Sir William Osler (1849-1919) was a renowned teacher-scholar-clinician, and one of the four founding physicians of Johns Hopkins Medical Center. His thought-provoking reflections are often quoted for their timely wisdom and insight. A foundational premise in cultivating humanism in clinical care is recognizing the critical importance of *presence* with our patients—understanding intuitively what Osler meant when he said, “We miss more by not *seeing* than by not knowing.” The mission of the *Journal of Humanities in Rehabilitation (JHR)* is to create an engaging and creative space that welcomes interdisciplinary scholars who share a passion for this art of seeing. They challenge us to view, experience, and contemplate our work from different angles and diverse opinions. Exploring this concept of “seeing,” we come to understand not only the value of observation in clinical diagnostics, but also the impact of “being seen” within the context of the therapeutic relationship.

Cultivating empathy begins with the ability to convey that we have *recognized* the other in our first step toward

understanding their lived experience. In our busy days, how easy it is to forget this powerful dimension of humanism in both the clinic and the classroom—our ubiquitous need simply to be recognized, to be understood. Forging stronger connections with the humanities provides health science education new avenues to develop these critical skills, whether through visual thinking strategies when viewing art in museums, or incorporating aspects of narrative medicine into our clinical encounters to co-create stories with our patients.

The writer Parker Palmer reflects on this gift of presence: “The human soul doesn’t want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed—to be seen, heard, and companioned exactly as it is. When we make that kind of deep bow to the soul of a suffering person, our respect reinforces the soul’s healing resources, the only resources that can help the sufferer make it through.”² Part of our job as clinicians is to recognize that while our knowledge and skills are the tools to facilitate the body’s recovery from illness, it is our shared humanness, our presence, that supports the healing power of the soul. How we dance along those lines—recognizing where our role is to fix or simply be present—is the beautiful, sometimes

haunting part of the rehabilitation landscape that the humanities can help us navigate.

Questions we may ask ourselves at the end of each day may begin with: “How well did I *see* each of my patients today?” Then perhaps we can reflect more deeply and ask: “Did I interact with my patients *so they felt seen* today?”

Our Fall 2019 Issue provides innovative ideas to prompt us to explore these avenues toward personal and professional growth.

Calling us forward, **Gail Jensen and colleagues share their professional insights in their Book Review, Exploring Excellence: Author Reflections on *Educating Physical Therapists***. In their vision, they “see the integration of the humanities into professional education as an essential component for preparing adaptive learners who can navigate uncertain situations in complex systems, act as advocates and moral agents, and demonstrate the moral courage to address societal needs, call out and seek to change substandard practice, and meet our professional obligations.”¹ These scholarly leaders embrace *JHR*’s mission, providing support for adopting the humanities across the curriculum.

We are excited about our third installment of our Profiles in Professionalism series, in which we sit down with Nancy R. Kirsch, PT, DPT, PhD, FAPTA, program director and professor of physical therapy at Rutgers University in Newark, NJ—a thinker whose compassionate, prolific scholarship is recognized throughout the field of rehabilitation. In this interview, Dr. Kirsch explores how physical therapy has evolved, and the critical role the humanities play in developing caring and compassionate professionals.

The Fall 2019 Issue of *JHR* also features these fascinating articles, poetry, and essays:

Portrait of Spirit: One Story at a Time

Melissa McCune

Billy Howard and Maggie Holtzberg offer us a new angle to view the world, challenging us to closely examine the lived experience of disability through narrative and photography. Their work is an intimate and moving opportunity to appreciate the role of humanities to broaden our lens outside of ourselves, extending our view towards others. It is compelling, in part because of the beauty of the images and language, but as art is known to do, their work causes us to pause, reckoning with the paradox of the ubiquity of disability (most likely we will all be disabled at some point in our lives), yet our society is structured such that the lives of those with disability goes largely unnoticed. As with any tendency towards stigma, bias, preconceptions—it takes engagement on a personal level, knowing, hearing each other’s stories, before attitudes and prejudices shift. And that is the power of this type of project, which takes us deeper into the lives of individuals.

Making the Case for Critical Disability Studies *With* Rehabilitation Sciences

Donya Mosleh

In this issue’s Perspective, Donya Mosleh, PhD argues for a new mode of scholarly practice that recognizes and addresses tensions between two fields that seemingly occupy opposite ends of a continuum. In order to promote a more productive engagement, critical disability studies *with* rehabilitation sciences unsettles knowledge relations that position these two fields as oppositional and incompatible.

Reading Eucalyptus

Christy DiFrances Remein

In this report, Christy DiFrances Remein, director of the Narrative Writing Program at Boston University Medical Campus, skillfully illustrates her encounter with a work of fiction, offering us an awareness of narrative's ability to promote resilience through the practice of reflection, exploration, and healing.

Finding *Help*

Shaun R. Cleaver and colleagues

The main focus of rehabilitation is to provide help to those who need it. But does the Western definition of “help” always apply in other regions? In *Finding Help: Exploring the Accounts of Persons With Disabilities in Western Zambia*, the authors present the concept of *help* in a completely new light and offer suggestions for a more societally-based approach to healing.

Human Anatomical Gifts and Informed Consent: Three Perspectives

Chase Montague, Deon Thompson, and Jason Lesandrini

The United States abides by the Revised Uniform Anatomical Gift Act to regulate bodies donated to science; prior consent must be given. When DPT students at Georgia State University had the opportunity to attend an anatomic exhibition displaying preserved human specimens from another country, many ethical questions arose. In this article, three writers offer their perspectives, developed during the discussions that ensued, on the ethics of anatomic study—and exhibition.

The Best is the Enemy of the Good

David Gillette

The healthcare professions often attract talented, committed perfectionists. But what can practitioners do when that perfectionism negatively affects rehabilitation? In this Reflection, David Gillette describes how his PT residency experience, and the thoughtful guidance of his mentors, helped him confront the negative aspects of his perfectionism and turn his thoughts toward the *good*.

CHEP-JHR Essay Contest

The winning essay in the second annual physical therapy student essay contest, co-sponsored by the ACAPT Consortium for the Humanities, Ethics, and Professionalism (CHEP) and the JHR, was featured in our Spring 2019 issue.

In this issue, we showcase the work of our two finalists. Congratulations to Mercedes Aguirre and Jake Raecker!

In a sensitive reflection, **Out of Oxygen**, Ms. Aguirre describes an incident during her first clinical experience that taught her the importance of taking a deep breath—and speaking up on behalf of one's patient.

In **Beyond First Impressions**, Mr. Raecker provides a powerful account of an interaction with a patient during his first clinical rotation that taught him to see past a shocking first impression—to focus on care and compassion.

The Third Annual Student Essay Contest is Now Open for Submissions!

The essay prompt for the 2019-2020 physical therapy student essay contest is:

Working closely with patients, families, and colleagues offers healthcare professionals opportunities for meaningful connection. However, challenges may arise when we encounter perspectives, values, priorities, and communication styles different from our own. Describe a time when you were challenged in such a way, and how you responded.

Timeline: Submissions will be accepted from November 15, 2019 to January 5, 2020. Any submissions sent in after 11:59 PM (EST) on January 5, 2020 will not be reviewed. The winner and two finalists will be announced in the Spring 2020 issue of *JHR*.

For more details, see our [CHEP-JHR contest webpage](#). For more information about CHEP, please see their [CHEP](#) webpage.

We Welcome a New *JHR* Editorial Board Consultant, and a Faculty Associate Editor

We are honored to welcome Cindy Smalletz, MS, MA, one of the first graduates of the Columbia University Narrative Medicine Master's program, who went on to become the creator, designer, and director of Columbia's first online certificate program in Narrative Medicine. By bringing together narrative medicine with her extensive training in education and technology, she seeks to change healthcare around the world through better training, communication, self-awareness, and action.

Additionally, we welcome Cynthia Dodds, PT, PhD, PCS, associate professor, Medical University of South Carolina, as *JHR*'s Faculty Associate Editor. Dr. Dodds will be assisting our Perspectives in Art History

Section Editor Siobhan Conaty, PhD in the development and review of articles.

Congratulations to Melissa McCune—the 2019 Frank S. Blanton, Jr. MD Humanities in Rehabilitation Scholar

Emory DPT/MPH student Melissa McCune was awarded the Frank S. Blanton, Jr., MD Humanities in Rehabilitation Scholar award in recognition of her dedication to the pursuit of knowledge in the humanities, a deep desire to foster awareness of humanities in health professions, and a gentle kindness and compassion in relating with others. This award recognizes interdisciplinary graduate students who exemplify a dedication to the pursuit of knowledge in the humanities, a deep desire to integrate the arts and sciences in health professions, and gentle kindness and compassion in relating to others.

Thank you for joining us. We hope you enjoy the Fall 2019 Issue of *JHR*.

If you are interested in submitting your work to *JHR*, please review our [Submission Guidelines](#). If you are considering being a reviewer, please contact Dr. Sarah Blanton: follow the [Contact link](#), indicate the content area you are interested in reviewing, and attach your CV.

References

1. Jensen GM, Mostrom E, Hack LM, Nordstrom T, Gwyer J. [Educating Physical Therapists](#). Thorofare, NJ: SLACK Inc., Healio.com; 2019.
2. Palmer P. The gift of presence, the perils of advice. *OnBeing* newsletter. Available at: <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-gift-of-presence-the-perils-of-advice/>. Accessed August 31, 2019.

About the Author



Dr. Sarah Blanton is an Associate Professor of Rehabilitation Medicine at Emory University School of Medicine, Division of Physical Therapy. She graduated from the University of Virginia in 1987 with a BA degree in biology, from Emory University in 1992 with her masters in physical therapy and received her clinical doctorate in physical therapy in 2003. She has a specialty certification in Neurology through the American Board of Physical Therapy. After nine years working in neurologic rehabilitation at Emory Center for Rehabilitation Medicine, she served as project coordinator for several research studies, including two multi-site, NIH-funded national clinical trials. In 2006, Dr. Blanton joined the faculty of the Emory Doctor of Physical Therapy program and her teaching has included geriatrics, mental health, cultural diversity and neurorehabilitation. Dr. Blanton's current research focus includes stroke survivor and family quality of life, including depression, fatigue, caregiver/family functioning and post-stroke education. The long-term goals of her research efforts are to develop methods to support family focused rehabilitation approaches that facilitate the active integration of the caregiver throughout physical therapy practice.

Dr. Blanton's interest in the *Journal of Humanities in Rehabilitation* stems from her ongoing exploration of the intersections of creativity and spirituality to gain insight into the human experience of suffering, joy and mystery. In her teaching, she has found the use of narrative to be an exceptionally powerful tool to foster reflection and personal insight for both students and patients. In her research, she is incorporating multi-media formats to develop family education interventions in the home environment. A photographer since childhood, she has enjoyed sharing her artwork through exhibits at Emory University, speaking with chaplaincy students on "Reflections of Art and Spirituality in Appalachia" and as a guest contributor to the Public Radio show, *On Being*.