

Empathy

By Jamie Fleshman, SPT

I've never needed much from sympathy,
the way it takes and takes
from me the energy I cannot waste
to say I'm fine.

Give me empathy instead.

Tell me you've fought an uphill battle,
having heaved your own leaden limbs
through the drudgery
to find yourself stronger,
in the very hour when hope was lost.

I've never needed much from sympathy.
The pity and the bless-her-hearts,
erasing and replacing my lived experience
with narrow interpretations of my grief.

Give me empathy instead.

Tell me you were unsure of the version of yourself
that would emerge from the flames,
roots extending from the embers,
feeling for an identity to cling to.

I've never needed much from sympathy.

How you ask for me to carry the weight of your moral
injury,
my square-peg-round-hole of a diagnosis hammered
into your timelines and expectations.

Tell me you don't know my story,
but that you've met with your own demons
seeking to destroy your sense of self.

Give me that empathy.

Tell me you don't know my pain,
but that you've wrestled with your own searing serpent
nerves,
threatening your very connection to what is real.
Give me that empathy.

Tell me you don't know where I'm headed,
but that you've felt the sun slip from your own sky,
unsure of its will to rise again.

Give me that empathy.
Give me sympathy, and I will bear down, dig in, clam
up.
Give me sympathy, and I will avoid and erase my pain
for you.
But give me empathy, and I will share my burden.
Give me empathy, and my humanity is unlocked.
Give me empathy, and I am open to healing.

About the Author



Jamie Fleshman is a second-year Doctor of Physical Therapy student at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, Georgia. She has also started the Master of Public Health program at Rollins School of Public Health at Emory as a dual degree student. Jamie served in the United States Navy as a Mandarin Chinese linguist for eight years, and it was during this time that she began to appreciate the role physical health and wellness played in maintaining her own mental and emotional health. With this in mind, she finished her service with the military and moved to Oregon to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Human Physiology at the University of Oregon. During her undergraduate career, Jamie discovered a passion for social justice and the humanities through a secondary focus in Women's and Gender Studies. This led her to seek out the dual DPT/MPH program at Emory, where she hopes to acquire the skills necessary to implement community-based rehabilitation programs for vulnerable populations. Writing and photography have always been creative outlets for Jamie, and she aims to use these skills in combination with her knowledge of the human body to highlight the multiplicity of human experience around us.