

Poem: At Rehab

By Amy Haddad, PhD, RN, FAAN

These are people who know their way
around pulleys, braces,
and electronic lifts.
They can briskly break down a wheelchair,
flatten a walker,
click open a cane
with an economy of motion,
not really looking
at what they are doing.
Like raccoons washing a prized bit of food
in a crystal stream,
paws busy, efficiently working
but their gaze off in the distance
starting at the horizon or
a flag being whipped by the wind
at the other end of the parking lot.
The mother in the blue van
tugs a strap to secure her limp son.
The husband in the white car
lifts his wife's useless leg in the front seat,
gently gathering her skirt
round both legs.
The daughter in the station wagon
cups the crown of her father's gray head
so he doesn't hit the door frame then
drops the metal walker in the trunk.

Sometimes, while loading and unloading

the fragile cargo of their cars and vans,
they catch each other's eyes
and heft the weight of each other's burden.
A mix of pity and pride settle in a
small smile that passes briefly
between them.

Then, as if nothing happened,
turn their gaze back to their hands,
close the trunk,
slide the door to, and drive away.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY FOR "AT REHAB" AND GENERAL COMMENTS ABOUT POETRY

My poetry often has its roots in the commonplace. "At Rehab" opens with an everyday activity – getting in and out of a car. We have all done this more times than we could count. We may also have considerable experience, especially if we are health care professionals, with helping others get into and out of cars. The title of the poem directs the reader to a particular setting with its accompanying expectations. There is even an insider's tone in the use of "rehab" instead of "rehabilitation." Only those in the know are allowed to abbreviate complicated words like this. However, the poem doesn't take us into the rehab

setting itself. We are left standing outside in the parking lot. Why? Poetry uses images and metaphors to draw us in with an economy of words. Each word in a poem is important. How the poem fills the space on the page is important. Listening to a poem rather than reading it offers a different experience of the patterns and music of the words in this particular combination. One place to start in reading a poem is to ask, "What is going on here?" My intention was to focus on the people in the parking lot who have been transformed by illness and injury without saying anything like that. What seem to be ordinary actions are anything but. The almost unconscious movements, the handling of loved ones and equipment with even-handed detachment, are moved to the foreground. The details about the people and the emotions they experience are held in check. Although I wrote the poem to speak to readers in these ways, they may not see it as I intend. Each

person who reads the poem will see something different.

A close reading of a poem can lead us to a place that causes us to stop because we recognize where we are. Poetry asks us to pay attention, to look at life in a new way, to discover what is right in front of us that we cannot see. What we health care professionals do not know about the lives, hopes, and fears of our patients and their families is enormous. Poetry is a way to open the door to what is hidden or unknown about others and us. Reading and engaging with poetry can enhance our capacity to empathize with those we care for and cause us to listen more carefully to the stories they tell us about their lives.

– *Amy Haddad, Ph.D., R.N. – October 13, 2014*

About the Author



Amy Haddad, PhD, RN, FAAN helped lead the growing national awareness of the importance for formal ethics education in the health professions. Her expertise was relatively unique in the pharmacy world and she quickly established herself as an innovative and prolific scholar. Her focus was on inculcating a solid foundation in ethical theory that was then explicitly translated to contemporary clinical practice. The ethical care of patients was always the articulated goal of her teaching. Haddad's list of external awards is long and distinguished. She received recognitions for creativity, intellectual curiosity and rare talent such as Carnegie Scholar, Robert K. Chalmers Distinguished Pharmacy Educator, Pellegrino Medal, Rho Chi Lecture awards and was named a Hastings Center Fellow and a Fellow in the American Academy of Nursing. She completed an MFA in Creative Writing at Queens University in Charlotte, NC in 2019.