

Systole



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Members of the HEART team:

Pradip D. Patel, MD - Chair

Gary Anderson, PhD

Anees Chapgar, MD

Toni Ganzel, MD

Ruth Greenberg, PhD

Sarah Griffin, MD

Amy Holthouser, MD

Jennifer Koch, MD

Charles Kodner, MD

Robert Clint Morehead, MD

David Wiegman, PhD

Class of 2010

Kyle Cothron

Stephen Dinetz

Class of 2011

Barak Davis

Doug Kelley

Class 2012

Rick Bowles

Trish Todd

Wendye Walter

Welcome to the 1st edition of Systole, UofL School of Medicine's literary journal. HEART is an acronym for Humastic, Empathetic, Altruistic, Relationship-centered Team. HEART is a group of faculty, students, and administrators at the School of Medicine who are committed to creating opportunities for the medical school community to value and appreciate efforts among and between physicians, patients, students, staff, and other healthcare professionals who work with us to provide quality patient care to foster caring, compassionate relationships.

HEART meets monthly to plan activities and initiatives that will promote a more relationship-centered culture at the School of Medicine. This inaugural volume of Systole represents what we hope will become an annual publication that celebrates the writings of members of our academic community.

Systole has Greek origins denoting "a drawing together or contraction." We hope this journal will bring together our academic medical community in fostering humanism in medicine. Partial funding for this inaugural journal comes from Dr. Pinkstaff. Dr. Pinkstaff was a former professor of Pediatrics in the School of Medicine. He embodied the spirit of humanism; influencing many students, residents, and faculty over the years. His death this past spring was untimely, however, his memory and humanistic manner will be honored with this journal and for years to come. We hope you enjoy reading Systole as much as we enjoyed publishing it.

Pradip D. Patel, MD

Jennifer Koch, MD

Ruth Greenberg, PhD

Editors-in-Chief

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A New Definition for a Non-Violent World

Trish Todd

Class of 2012

“I am not a visionary. I claim to be practical idealist. The religion of non-violence is not meant merely for the rishis and saints. It is meant for the common people as well. Non-violence is the law of our species....The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law-to the strength of the spirit.”

-Mahatma Gandhi

Young India, II-8-20

It has been a sad but necessary realization that violence is an integral part of our existence today seeming to permeate almost all aspects of life in which humans interact with each other and their environments. I recently had the opportunity to read a collection of essays by world leaders, notable social activists, and authors/journalists speaking to both the reality and need for dissolution of violence in our world. The idea of non-violence is not new to me; like many, I was introduced to non-violence in high school through the story of Mahatma Gandhi. Over time, I started to question the significance of non-violence as a tenet of American or any democratic society. Democracies pride themselves on a foundation of equality and justice; that notion is instilled in its citizens at a young age. Yet, are not those ideals and abolishing violence necessarily compatible?

Violence has always been a part of human history. However, globalization and the technological revolution have given us the opportunity to perceive the effects of violence as they occur on a worldly scale. The constant influx of media coverage of the suffering around the world and within our own communities calls us to question the reason why we continue to adhere to the notion that violence is the mechanism by which progress can be made. Why is it so easy to discard our inherent sense of ethics to move forward?

One can reasonably assume that most rational persons would articulate a preference for less rather than more violence in the context of terrorism, war, murder, rainforest destruction, slavery, etc. Yet, it is also a well-known truth that human actions do not always reflect their ideals. Far too often, we have chosen violence as a means to an end. And, although we are disturbed by suffering, we do not see a connection between suffering and our decisions to invoke violence in the way we live our lives and conduct our affairs.

Responding to suffering is like treating the symptoms of a disease rather than the cause. It does nothing to stop the potential for violence in the future. To resolve the suffering of others, we must look at the definition of violence. Many define violence as an assault or damaging act towards another. I would argue, however, that this definition of violence is superficial; rather, violence should be defined as any act of human-inflicted suffering. This definition of violence expands the traditional understanding of violence, for it includes also actions that create inequity and place one's objectives above the happiness (or life) of another, which, in my mind, is a form of injustice. In this sense, violence and injustice are the same. Thus, if we accept the connection between violence and injustice, we must conclude that violence in our world has reached a new level.

Unfortunately, inequality and injustice have become prerequisites for modern success, and we are driven by success. For example, take a company that outsources its factories to developing countries where it can produce cheaper products by employing people who have no ability to request safe working conditions with sustainable compensation. The company has made this decision in order to increase its customer base and, subsequently, its profit. Its own objectives have been consciously determined to be more important and valuable than the lives of the individuals who work in the factories and live in the factory communities. Using my expanded definition of violence, the company's behavior is both unjust and violent. Whether consciously or unconsciously, consumers now accept this form of violence.

How then does one adopt a perfectly just worldview? Certainly, perfection is not part of human nature. However, the standard of perfection helps to define the direction in which a person or society must move if the end is maturation or betterment. Furthermore, the intent of perfection in this case is both noble and necessary, for, as Gandhi stated, two options exist for humanity: Non-violence or Non-existence. To become perfectly just is not easily accomplished, but what I have read and experienced in my life has led me to believe that the path to non-violence can be embodied in one word: empathy. A just purview comes from a conscious effort to intellectually displace oneself into the lives of others: those around us and those so far from us that we only know of their existence through pictures or television. Justice is treating others with respect, valuing others as one would oneself. Being able to empathize with others fosters such mutual understanding in both a rational and emotive context.

To say that empathy will end all violence cannot literally be accepted by any reasonable person. Empathy is the guideline; it takes a personal commitment to justice and non-violence to actually achieve a world without violence. Yet, a reasonable person should be able to recognize the paradox of espousing justice, while accepting suffering as inevitable or as a consequence of something external to his or her own actions. Similarly, one should be able to acknowledge the trap our daily acts of injustice (and, hence, violence) create for us by causing the suffering we find ourselves politically or socially working to end. As I have attempted to understand the violence and suffering in our world, I have not been deterred, as many might predict, by its pervasive existence. Rather, I identify with Gandhi in being a practical idealist. A world without violence is neither ingenuous nor unrealistic. I would hope that as more people consider the idea, it would lose its elusiveness. So, think about it.

Untitled

Supra Parthasarathy
Class of 2010
3rd Place

walking out, sitting down,
knees up, back on ground,
hands behind head and

close eyes, see black.
open eyes, black velvet pinned up with stars,

eternally there.
aware of all sights and sounds.
we become one.

yearning, gazing.
reach out into reality, grab nothing.
geometric shapes, zodiac signs,
myths, legends,
stories of antiquity,
come alive.

flying horses, dippers to dogs,
nebulas, stars (blue, red, yellow),
black holes, supernovas,
presently looking into the past.
always the past.
can I see it in the present?

only in dreams. in dreams,
stroll craters, witness explosions,
amalgamation of gases, booming eruptions.

skip rings, experience heat,
touch coolness in dreams.
fly in infinite darkness,
spin the spiral,
pat the horse's head,
boil the crab, devour the flesh.
box colors, rouse the shapes,
soar with rocks, zoom with ice.

reach out in dreams; touch all of existence.
alas, only in dreams.
open eyes. see possibilities.
close eyes and live them.

Cadaver

Timothy Scott Tatum
Class of 2012

cadaver
your entire life
and now i stand here with a knife

make my cuts across your plain
reflect the land to reveal the plan

it's weird, but
i can believe you were once like me
honestly
i can't believe you now can't see

for me to stand
and for you to lie
was your entire life
built so i could understand your life?

Whisper - In Memory of Christopher

Sara Gleason

GEMS Program Student

1st Place

Close your eyes.
Scrunch them tightly so the world won't see the
longing
behind them.
Fill your dying lungs
with the breath of life. Blow out
four
lonely candles.
Don't wonder if there will ever be
five.
Remember these trembling lips
that brush the top of your smooth head.
Consider the healing in their touch.
What did you wish for?

Wash the icing from your wan face.
Brush your teeth 'til they match your skin.
Stop.
Stare
at the frail image in the mirror.
Look deep into those large, dancing eyes.
What do they hope for?

Wrap yourself in
cotton train-sets.
Crawl into bed and stare out the window.
Pick a star.
Close your eyes.
Slow
your
racing
heart.
What did it pray for?

Wake up!
Look out the window!
The dark is gone!
Let's search for a pot of gold and...
Mommy said, Wake up!
Don't just lie there:
Turn your head,
open your eyes,
breathe my name ...
Please...

Lie there
in peace.
Is this what you wished for?

A Leper's Ode To The Moon

Charlie Brown
Class of 2010

Shed not on me your constant light,
Spotless maiden of the night,
A brutal blow you deal to me,
When I view your face in that darkened sea.

For I know your sister roams
In day across earth's azure dome;
And plants there so you may spark,
Your kindred torches that touch the dark.

These bitter beams, O haloed maid,
Unmercifully steal night's friendly shade,
That guards and hides my face from men;
You destroy night, a leper's only friend.

Madeline

Timothy Scott Tatum
Class of 2012

madeline

mad at myself
'cause i signed on the line
the life of a little baby duck
who would've been just fine

it is a lesson i will always hold tight to
i will never forget what it was like to
hold the baby girl in the palms of my hands
as she lunged her beak forward for one very last breath

and I will never forget the feeling of death
when i am at fault
when my hands put her to rest.

Rear Admiral

**Esther N. Udoji
Class of 2010**

Why are we standing still
On a day like today?
We have scaled the hill.
It's our job to live.
Or are you out to kill
Because of the unknown?

Honey, look at me now.
You promised no matter
No ifs, buts, when and how
That you'd stand by me.
So please take a bow
With you I never doubt.

We have been here before
And won. That is why it
Keeps coming back for more.
I got life left, thanks to
God. You know I adore
You now more than ever.

Just as the last few times
appointment is routine.
Like two big windchimes
We followed orders,
Committed no crimes,
Sacrificed for my life.

Hi Rear Admiral, it's
Been such a very long
Time since I threw those fits
Denying my cancer.
Now, a humble man sits
Waiting for an answer.

Feel all right Admiral
Thanks for the inquiries
Meds were all oral, no
major side effects, or
Problems in general
Carol made sure of it.

Someone else is present
Today. Unfamiliar
But yet reminiscent
Of my own little girl.
Why is she so silent?
Uh, she allowed to watch?

Oh, ok. A physician
In training! Here to test
The ego of a man
Who isn't afraid to
Hang his rear as a fan
And be vulnerable.

But I really do hope
That all those enemas
I took to help me cope
Have somehow helped my
Body just like the Pope
Lifted my broken soul.

You are moving the exam
Table. Guess it's almost
Over. Come here Carol.
We will wait solemnly
Like fresh sweet ham
On holiday tables.

Frozen, directionless
Our minds stagnant, like the
Trojans lay motionless
In the war that spanned
Years lacking happiness
Just showered upon us.

The same song is always different...

Samaha Nasser
Class of 2010

"...Tell my mother, tell my father, I hope they understand...I've done the best I can, I'm not angry, I'm just saying, sometimes goodbye is a second chance..."

It began with a stem of wilted honeysuckle and a song on the radio. The lyrics are familiar to me, having just listened to them mere hours earlier that morning as I plowed through the darkened grass, feeling the dew seeping so unceremoniously into my running shoes. My vision was guided only by the sporadic orange-tinged flashes of the street lamps that were peppered throughout my route. These early morning escapes felt almost surreal—my call back to reality occurred only when I registered the four o'clock time on my watch while acknowledging the dubious stares from the lone drivers that kept me fleeting company in the dark. My legs took me past the usual quiet houses where the inhabitants now lay sleeping, and I quickly wondered about the love and despair that might be contained within those brick walls. Just as suddenly, my vista changed along with my momentum as I passed the local bakery, warmth emanating from the doorways and condensing on the windows. I glared at my own sweaty countenance replete with dark circles under my eyes through the plate glass. I raised a hand to wave at the two men gently and methodically kneading the dough as they carefully prepared their wares for the day. They, too, were my compatriots when no one else was awake; they understood the beauty of anonymity that the dawn offered. Life had not yet had the chance to present its share of complications and hardships. My legs swiftly carried me forward and out of their lives. I continued on, hearing only the music through my headphones alternating with my foot strikes. I lived for these moments when I felt weightless and liberated, sweeping through the streets like a sneaker-clad apparition.

My body finally arrived at a sidewalk positively obscured by wild honeysuckle bushes that scraped at my arms and forehead, demanding me to stop, breathe, and take in my surroundings. I reluctantly obeyed. The fragrant aroma overwhelmed me as the sweetness lingering in the stillness of the darkened air around me left me no choice but to close my eyes and inhale that very moment.

That same scent assaulted me as I opened the door to visit her that morning. I clumsily fumbled for both the light switch and her name, admonishing my selective memory for forgetting so quickly. There we were, bathed in shocking, unflattering fluorescence—my gaze traveling from the wilted stem of honeysuckle precariously placed atop the windowsill, reaching forlornly toward any iota of sunshine, to the balloon bouquets drooping ever so slightly in the air-conditioned chill, and then finally to her, the thirteen year-old new mother. The words sounded paradoxical to my own ears, an idea almost unfathomable to me, but there she was, existing and breathing, a veritable child holding her own child. I asked her the questions that had become our formulaic dance for the past two mornings, me blurting out anything I could think of while she looked right through me with glazed eyes and offered monosyllabic responses. My litany was interrupted when a nurse arrived to switch off the alarming monitor and I waited, relieved and grateful for the welcome respite from my own inane banter. I stole a glance again at the girl in the bed before me, at her matted hair and gray eyes that were impossible to read. I

could think only of sports teams and musicals, of restaurant outings after Friday night football games, nights where we stayed out past the ten o'clock curfew sharing desserts and gossip while feeling remarkably vogue and invincible. I thought of the dances and limousines that surrounded the biggest priorities of the year—proms, dates, and acquiring the perfect dress. I wondered whether any of these thoughts whirring through my head like sequential still-frames coincided with the presence of a child. I wanted to talk to her, to have her confide in me her fears, anxieties, and inevitable hopes. Yet I kept quiet, afraid to ask and maybe to know just how she truly felt, and those eyes continued to betray nothing, not a sign of desperation or a cry for help, only an impermeable mask of passivity. I asked her if she had any questions or if she needed anything, silently willing her to talk to me, to speak with me and convince me of my connection to her not as a student, but as a fellow human being. Our connection had been fleeting and professional, leaving no room for painful revelations. I awkwardly wished her a perfunctory congratulations, and she responded with a hollow 'thanks' without so much as a glance, too overwhelmed and wholly consumed by the tiny body and beating heart nestled in her arms. I backed out nervously, knowing that I could have done something more but unsure of exactly what it was. I simmered in my own disappointment of my behavior, frustrated with my inability to overcome my hesitation, my desire to reach out to another smothered by my insecurities. Relieved of my duty to her, I edged out into the hallway just in time to hear the strains of the song on her radio..."*Sometimes goodbye is a second chance.*"

Rest

Linda Shiber
Class of 2009
2nd Place

I have never had to tell someone they're going to die. I've read about dying—the multitudinous ways the body expires; I've discussed the delivery of bad news in ethics groups and I've even threatened certain deserving parties with bodily harm. But never had someone trusted my knowledge enough to ask me, seriously, if they had a death sentence. Even in this story, I didn't utter the words. I simply looked on, half scared while the thing unfolded.

During my first week of Medicine wards, my team had a patient who might be dying. We didn't know for sure. There were still CT official reads and intractable pathological evidence pending, but she wanted to know. She was sitting in bed each morning, anxious, sleepless, greasy-haired, status post hip replacement with a different one of her children attending each time we visited. She had been admitted for a hip fracture—a middle aged woman with Crohn's disease and a nasty cigarette habit. There hadn't been any trauma or any real reason to break a hip at fifty-something, so we immediately attached the word 'pathological' to it and searched for a reason. The CT was grim. Even I, a third year student, could tell that those spots in her liver, lung and bone were a dismal sign. The first few mornings we set her up for it. She asked, "Do you know anything yet?" and we fielded that by saying things like, "It could be cancer but we can't be sure," gentle shoves toward an awful truth. She would nod, grab her daughter's hand, assure us that she was going to stay strong. "Just let me know what I have to do and I'll do it."

I think it was more terrible for her the day before we bestowed the diagnosis officially. She cried a little that morning, said she was just really scared. It seemed to me like we were keeping her in some kind of sadistic suspense in which everyone knew the answer but wouldn't say it out loud just yet. When we finally told her, the next day, she was dry eyed. She already knew. She had known all along, but there was still something final about hearing it for sure, from the white-coated people. She wanted to know what came next, and we told her we'd be handing her over to another team who would set up her therapy. And we did. We transferred her a few days later; since then, I occasionally see her son or one of her daughters in the hallway while we round on other patients. I can't forget hearing her say that she was finally able to sleep the night after we told her. I never thought news like that could be a relief.

What did I learn from this experience? I learned, oddly, that saying the word 'cancer' may be liberating for a patient. I learned that there are some things that a person just knows—inherently, intuitively, this woman knew she had cancer and when we finally, definitively told her, it was more a relief than utter devastation. I imagined that her sleepless nights would get worse, not immediately better, after hearing the official version of what she already believed. Granted, the diagnosis was awful; but what was even worse for her was sitting in limbo, in a hospital bed, wondering what evil humors were colluding in the core of her body. Ultimately, I learned just how valuable it is to communicate with your patients honestly, without underestimating their ability to comprehend their own health, especially in these very difficult situations.

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