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Editorial

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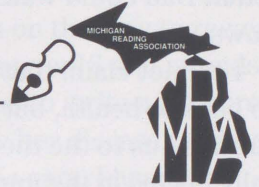
Editorial

Cover Page Footnote

I thank Marlene Bruno (for introducing me to Norman Cousins' work and inspiring this article); Dr. Diane Brunner; Diane Chamberlain; Marge Johnson; Miss Michigan, Terri Sue Liford; and Dr. Vera Milz for assistance with these sources.

Editorial

BY ROBERT L. SMITH



USING LITERACY TO COPE AND TO LITERALLY CURE OURSELVES

My heart rouses
thinking to bring you news
of something
that concerns you
and concerns many men. Look at
what passes for the new.
You will not find it there but in
despised poems.
It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.
Hear me out
for I too am concerned
and every man
who wants to die at peace in his bed
besides.

William Carlos Williams, M.D.
from *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower*

For the past year and a half, my father has been recovering from hip replacement surgery. His first surgery was near medical perfection. Unfortunately, when his second artificial hip caused internal infection, he battled ill health for what seemed an unending period. Despite his perseverance and chipper spirits, Dad's condition was at times critical. After what we thought was the final operation, an unanticipated ulcer ruptured: in a weak-

ened state, Dad faced the scalpel once more. Through such an ordeal, how do patients cope with their own fears as well as the feelings of the family members surrounding them? How do people communicate with physicians or nurses or others who pay more attention to the medical chart than to what the patient says? And what can we read in addition to religious books to keep our spirits up as we recuperate? I believe that these are meaningful questions for a class to consider because they help students see many connections between life and language...and that literature can be a powerful tool.

During Dad's successful recuperation, the family knew to keep him well-supplied with flowers, music, letters and books to read. However, it was my close friend Marlene Bruno who knew to give him a copy of Norman Cousins' *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*. This book describes how the then 30-year editor of *Saturday Review* beat 500-to-one odds, recovering from a serious illness in which the connecting tissue in his spine was deteriorating. Cousins' treatment, arrived at through self-reflection (he realized that he had been exposed to noxious fumes and then figured out why it affected him more than it affected others) and through collaboration with his physician, consisted primarily of large doses of humor (delivered in a comfortable environment—i.e., outside the hospital!) and vitamin C. Though my dad's case was not as serious as Cousins', we saw no reason not to position a videotape player

so that Dad could watch humorous shows.

I cannot claim that Dad laughed his hip back to health, but Cousins' book did introduce us to the theory that health literally begins in the mind. Cousins explores the possibility that the mind functions as a multi-purpose gland which releases health-producing chemicals, and he submits that the process may be stimulated by hearty laughing. Even if the self-prescription of humor is merely a placebo, says Cousins, the patient's own active involvement in seeking return to health, is a potent force. Cousins' ideas interest me because his seeking of tools to help others assertively resume health supports the idea that skillful writing—at least of the humorous type and probably any type which activates a patient's will to live—is an asset to health.

Exploring the lifestyles and ideas of thinkers the likes of William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jonas Salk, Albert Schweitzer and Pablo Casals and others, Cousins (1979, 1983) counsels us never to underestimate the power of the human mind: "The life force may be the least understood force on earth" (1979, p. 48). Cousins' writings have pointed me toward my essay's major claim: Since healing is a holistic process involving mind as well as body, all people ought to be taught to use reading and writing to deal with illness and loss. Brody (1987) asserts that "storytelling as an activity within society is allied to healing and can serve a healing function" (p. 13). This position is supported by a trend, within the medical profession itself, of students using literature as a tool to understand life.

As early as 1973, one young American who aspired to be a physician was floored by the University of Michigan interviewer's first inquiry: "Tell me about the last

novel you read." More recently, many medical schools have broadened their admission policies in recognition of the importance of language arts (Brody, 1987; Cousins, 1989). In Robert Coles' (1989) classroom at Harvard, medical students read literature by physicians such as Chekhov, Tolstoy and William Carlos Williams in order to make connections between their medical practices and people in general. Nixon and Wear (1991) advocate the use of literature and art as "nontraditional tools" in medical training to increase doctors' sensitivity and compassion (p. 242). In their medical curriculums, they use poems such as Frost's "Home Burial" and Williams' "Dead Baby" to provide an "imaginative glimpse into the lives of others and ourselves so that we gain a sense of the unpredictability and diversity of human behavior and response" (p. 246). These educators are creating a breed of physicians who understand the whole of the human condition rather than merely knowing human physiology. The humanistic concern of the new breed of doctors (no doubt strongly affected by the reemergence of women into leadership roles connected with caring for the sick) draws physicians closer to the world of poetry (witness forerunner Dr. William Carlos Williams).

Since many doctors are being prepared with literature, should not the average citizen also be taught to counterattack his or her own ills with language strategies? Survivor of at least two major illnesses, Norman Cousins is one who encourages everyone to take charge of her or his own health. Those who value an approach to medicine which favors mind as well as body can find solace in such self-assertive action. As already mentioned, Cousins' *Anatomy of an Illness* (1979) argues that humor really is

the best medicine, as *Reader's Digest* has lightheartedly claimed for years. In *The Healing Heart* (1983) Cousins explains how to survive a heart attack, drawing upon his own severe malady as example and showing how to repeat single words (e.g. "one") to transcend the stresses which block healing and health. Cousins left his career in publishing and went to the world of the medical school to help humanize the art of healing. But his writing, directed at the average citizen rather than for the education expert alone, serves to promote change both from within the medical profession and from within the queues of patients.

Examples of individuals who are far less knowledgeable about medicine than Cousins but who used self-redemptive strategies involving reading and writing to reclaim health are not rare. In Grawn, Michigan, a nine-year-old girl was diagnosed with cancer in 1989. As one way to cope with this unexpected problem, Shannin Chamberlain wrote *My ABC Book of Cancer*. The 30-page book helped to explain to her classmates, as well as to herself, why this disease had entered her body, why it would not beat her, and how everyone should treat someone who is ill. Her book, honored by the Northwestern Reading Council and later published nationally, contains information such as the following.

Q is for all the *questions* like,
Why me? What's that for? Will it hurt? Will I die? Do I have to be poked? When is it going to be over? (1990, p. 22, Italics not in original.)

W's for the *war*...between good cells and the bad. And it's also for *winner* which will be the good cells (p. 28)
According to the book's afterword,

Shannin's physician points to her writing as one reason she is on the way to recovery. Shannin, who is now 13 and attends junior high, has plans to write a "mature" book on health once her disease has been in remission for five years. I have no doubt that such writing can be a useful tool both in hospitals and in classrooms.

Another recent example of self-healing involved a 23-year-old communications major who in 1992 had just graduated with a teaching certificate from Eastern Michigan University. A self-described "fitness fanatic" from a family with no history of cancer, Terri Sue Liford had nevertheless contracted Hodgkin's disease, and it had spread through a third of her chest. As she tried to deal with the shock that cancer does not confine itself to the aged and unfit, she was immediately faced with the decision about whether to drop out or proceed with her fourth-time participation in the Miss Monroe Contest. Terri Sue confronted her own fears and misconceptions by researching her disease and its current treatments. Her extremely supportive family and friends also joined in the research effort. Since sickness increases the importance of understanding what you are putting in your body, Terri Sue and her supporters concentrated on nonfictional publications such as nutritional almanacs, pamphlets from the hospital, and books on natural healing. The reading helped Terri Sue make up her mind to keep pursuing her dreams. Terri Sue believes that "A mind is a very powerful thing. Cancer may eat away at your body, but it can never eat away at what's in your mind and in your heart" (*Herald-Palladium*, 6/15/92, p. 6B).

Although an English minor, Terri Sue had not been directly taught to use fiction or poetry as a tool for coping with personal trouble. Instead, she relied on nonfic-

tion as her tool. However, her literature courses did play a role in the formation of an attitude which kept Terri Sue battling her sickness. She remembers an English teacher at Jefferson High School teaching what Terri Sue says is "the best attitude to embrace"—*carpe diem*. Terri Sue did seize the day, singing her way in 1992 not only to the title of Miss Monroe but also to that of Miss Michigan. She also competed in the Miss America Pageant and achieved her dream of singing the National Anthem for the Detroit Tigers baseball team. Now she would like to write a book and find a full-time teaching position. Her illness is in remission partly because of the support from those around her, her research efforts, and her powerful attitude.

People like Terri Sue Liford, Shannin Chamberlain, Norman Cousins, and my father are finding ways, including the use of reading and writing, to overcome or adapt to serious illness. Yet what are our English departments—or any other discipline—doing to teach people about coping with what amounts to a universal human condition? I feel that we could be doing more.

In Figure One I list some of the literature related to health. As usual, our questions far outweigh our answers. How should we read such literature, i.e. what specific strategies will maximize the curative characteristics of the stories or poems? How will we balance fiction and nonfiction in this endeavor? When should people apply this tool—e.g. routinely like a vitamin to prevent disease or afterward like an antibiotic to rid the body of disease...or both? How can we teach students to do research as Terri Sue did and to write as a coping mechanism in the way Shannin did? Most importantly, what teaching methods will enable us to instill

within students the attitude that reading and writing literature are essential and multifaceted tools?

These questions surface like air bubbles under an icy pond. Unless teachers and researchers collaborate to do something to help break through existing barriers of tradition, lack of imagination and indifference, the questions will be trapped for a long season to come. Our first step ought to be to begin to think of literature not only as art or entertainment but as a practical tool necessary for surviving a long and meaningful life. The second step is to teach ourselves, and simultaneously others, how to wield the tools of reading and writing more consciously and effectively—not only in medical schools but in K-adult classrooms. Only then can the average student profit from stories over the course of a lifetime and be able to use language and literature to cope with both illness as well as other stressing losses.

(Figure One)

Literature Related to Health and Sickness

Fiction

Alison Rogers, (1987). *Luke Has Asthma, Too*. Waterfront. Ages 3-7 will profit from this upbeat story.

Rose Blue, (1972). *Grandma Didn't Wave Back*. Franklin Watts. Grades 4-6 will read successfully about a 10-year-old girl's grandmother who is losing her memory and facing a move to a nursing home.

Tomie de Paola, (1980). *Now One Foot, Now the Other*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. After a stroke, the man who taught Bobby how to walk must be retrained to walk and talk. See also another picture book by the same author, *Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs*, for the story of a boy's relationship with an invalid grandmother.

John Reynolds Gardiner, (1980). *Stone Fox*. NY: Harper & Row. The title makes it sound as if the Native American is the main character, but this chapter book is mostly a fanciful but moving tale of Willy's determination to bring his grandfather back from depression. Willy does get a boost from a Native American.

Franz Kafka, (1972). *The Metamorphosis*. NY: Bantam Books. See both Brody's (1987) and Wear's (1990) descriptions of how this surrealistic story of a man changed into a roach parallels the social treatment we provide when our loved ones are taken ill.

Lois Lowry, (1977). *A Summer to Die*. New York, Bantam Books. A sister who has many qualities to covet suddenly has a terminal sickness, too.

Thomas Mann, (1944). *The Magic Mountain*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf. Recommended by Brody (1987) because the main character is sick and much of the novel is set in a tuberculosis sanitarium.

William Somerset Maugham, (1963). *Of Human Bondage*. NY: Penguin Books. I have used this one successfully at the high school level. Also recommended by Brody (1987) for students interested in medicine.

Lois Metzger, (1992). *Barry's Sister*. Macmillan. Barry has cerebral palsy and Ellen must learn to live with that fact. Ages 10 and up.

Tillie Olsen, (1956). *Tell Me a Riddle*. NY: Dell. Wear (1990) makes use in her medical curriculum of this story of a dying Russian wife who is prevented from feeling her death by relatives. Also recommended by Brody (1987).

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, (1968). *The Cancer Ward*. NY: Dell. Brody's book (1987) describes usage of this.

Charles Shultz, (1990). *Why Charlie*

Brown, Why?: A Story About What Happens When a Friend is Very Ill. NY: Pharos Books. This television special has been made into a book. Linus offers support when a friend contracts leukemia.

Leo Tolstoy, (1886). *Death of Ivan Ilych*. NY: New American Library. Brody (1987) and Wear (1990) both suggest this literature for advanced students interested in medical educations.

Poetry

Adrienne Rich's poem "A Woman Dead in Her Forties." Used by Wear (1990) in medical schools, this poem mourns a woman's death from breast cancer.

Robert Frost's "Death of the Hired Hand," "Out Out—," "Departmental," "Fire and Ice" and "Nothing Gold Can Stay." Frost is not always pastoral.

Nash, Ogden, *Bed Riddance: A Posy for the Indisposed*. Boston: Little, Brown. This one fits Cousins' prescription for humor.

William Carlos Williams' poems "The Injury" and "The Last Words of My English Grandmother." An old woman is taken to the hospital against her will. In the ambulance she says she is tired of trees.

Nonfiction

David A. Adler, (1992). *A Picture Book of Florence Nightingale*. Holiday House. To approach illness from the care giver's perspective, try the story of the woman who made hospitals clean and efficient in the nineteenth century.

William Blinn, (1972). *Brian's Song*. NY: Bantam Books. A screenplay about the true story of two football players who competed for the same position until one got very sick. This is one book which has been frequently used in schools.

Erma Bombeck, (1989). *I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise*. NY: Harper & Row. Brave artwork from children at a camp for those with cancer inspired this famous humorist to write a tribute. Proceeds go to research organizations. This is a favorite of Shannin Chamberlain.

L. K. Brown, & Marc Brown, (1990). *Dinosaurs Alive and Well! A Guide to Good Health*. Boston: Little, Brown. Dinosaurs help students relate to one another and learn about their bodies. The authors have other books on safety and divorce.

Barbara Cohen, (1974). *Thank You, Jackie Robinson*. NY: Lothrop. The first black major league baseball player battled cancer, but this book is also about the battle of being fatherless. It is good for the sports-oriented youngster in grades 5-7.

Jason Gaes, (1987). *My Book for Kids with Cansur: A Child's Act of Hope*. Houghton Mifflin. Ages 3-9 can benefit from this book. Illustrated by the author's brother, this one is recommended by Shannin Chamberlain.

Jill Krementz, (1990). *How It Feels to Fight for Your Life*. Boston: Joy Street Books/Little, Brown. This book is suitable for fourth grade and on up. It is based on interviews of children.

Elizabeth Kubler-Roth, M.D., (1979). *Letter to a Child with Cancer (The Dougy Book)*. \$2.95, Elizabeth Kubler-Roth Center, South Route 616, Head Waters, VA 24442. 13-year-old Dougy asked three important questions about life and death. Before he died he decided others should share the answers he was given in this letter.

Oliver Sacks, (1983). *Awakenings*. NY: Dutton. Brody (1987) recommends this and the other publications by this neurologist. This one is now a movie.

Oliver Sacks, (1985). *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat*. NY: Harper & Row Publishers. The title describes an actual event. I have used these dramatic cases with adult learners.

Susan Sontag, (1978). *Illness as Metaphor*. NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Recommended by Brody (1987), Sontag is a magician with metaphors.

Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill" in *The Moment and Other Essays*. NY: Harcourt, Brace & World. Recommended by Brody (1987), this describes a bout with the flu; Woolf directly discusses sickness as a topic of literature.

Shannin Chamberlain's *My ABC Book of Cancer* (see reference list) has a good bibliography for children and teenagers. Cousins' (1989) *Head First: The Biology of Hope* lists many humorous books and films that have helped patients (pp. 150-53). For a more complete listing of adult resources, see Trautmann, J. (1982). *Literature and Medicine: An Annotated Bibliography*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

I thank Marlene Bruno (for introducing me to Norman Cousins' work and inspiring this article); Dr. Diane Brunner; Diane Chamberlain; Marge Johnson; Miss Michigan, Terri Sue Liford; and Dr. Vera Milz for assistance with these sources.

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