
L ISTENING FOR STORIES

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I teach in two settings--in the Journalism Institute at New York University, and in the medical school, where I work with medical students and precept pediatric residents in clinic. I've been struck by the ways that both curricula emphasize the art of the interview--the professional skill of making a connection with a stranger and proceeding fairly rapidly to a conversation which goes well beyond standard casual discourse. Clinical training in medicine is in many ways an education in story-telling, though the stories can be extraordinarily specialized, and I think that the draw of those stories, and the pleasures and challenges of the storytelling are certainly part of my own continuing connection to clinical medicine.

I am certainly a different writer because I am a physician--I think that medical training has shaped my voice, my perspective, my eye for a story, and certainly my window on human experience. I believe that writing, for me, has shaped me as an observer and as a storyteller, and therefore certainly affected me as a clinician--but that may be to say that for me, writing has been a path into imagining and understanding lives that I have not lived. I don't think it's the only such path, and I hesitate to claim that I am in some way a "better" doctor because I am a writer--I just know that these disciplines have shaped both my perceptions and my practices.

The skills that you acquire when you study journalism, the practices of reporting, verifying, observing, are closely connected to many of the skills that you use in clinical medicine. I write both fiction and nonfiction, both reported journalism and personal essays, and I enjoy the process of thinking through the different formats and possibilities when there is a story that I want to tell. Writing gives me a chance to think about the value of language, to explore the possibilities of word choice and rhythm and syntax, choices and decisions which are not necessarily important when you are making clinical choices and clinical decisions. But I think that part of medical training is in fact to come to grips with the many elements of assembling and observing stories of so many different kinds, collecting details, listening carefully to other voices, and finding ways to hear--and tell--the stories in the world around you.