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BOOK REVIEW

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Learning from the Dead

A review of *One Breath Apart: Facing Dissection* by Sandra L. Bertman. Amityville, NY: Baywood, 2009. 94 pp. (ISBN 978-0-89503-396-3). $28.95 (paperback). Reviewed by Paul C. Rosenblatt.

Sandra L. Bertman, Ph.D, FT, is Distinguished Professor of Thanatology and Arts, National Center for Death Education, Mount Ida College. She taught for several decades at the University of Massachusetts, teaching in the departments of psychology (Boston campus) and psychiatry and medicine (Worcester campus, where she was Professor of Humanities in Medicine and Director of the Program of Medical Humanities). Among her other books are *Facing Death: Images, Insights, and Interventions* (Taylor & Francis, 1991) and *Grief and the Healing Arts: Creativity as Therapy* (Baywood, 1999).

Paul C. Rosenblatt is Morse-Alumni Distinguished Teaching Professor of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. Among books he has authored are *Shared Obliviousness in Family Systems* (State University of New York Press, 2009), *African American Grief* (with Beverly R. Wallace, Brunner Routledge, 2005), *Parent Grief: Narratives of Loss and Relationship* (Brunner/Mazel, 2000), and *Bitter, Bitter Tears: Nineteenth Century Diarists and Twentieth Century Grief Theories* (University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

This creative, complex, evocative book is a short 94 pages, but it is filled with evocative pictures, each of which is worth 1,000 words, and it is also rich in evocative text. The pictures (and accompanying accounts) by first-year medical students at the University of Massachusetts were gathered over 30 years and address the emotional, ethical, spiritual, and other issues medical students deal with when confronting and then dissecting a cadaver in their first year gross anatomy course. The book also offers materials (poems, drawings, words of respect) from the student-designed memorial, gratitude, and forgiveness-seeking services that University of

Massachusetts medical students put on each spring for those whose bodies they have dissected and for the living relatives of those people.

The book was put together for medical students, to help them to confront the anxieties, fears, discomforts, ambivalences, ethical concerns, and other issues of taking gross anatomy and of being medical students. But for those of us who are not medical students, it is interesting to see the path medical education takes students on regarding emotions, emotional control and expression, empathy, relationship to the dead, relationship to other medical students and the medical profession, and the balance between detachment and emotional involvement with patients and cadavers. Beyond that, and the reason the book merits a review in *Death Studies*, it is a book that will interest, even fascinate, anyone who is interested in how people face death. As Bertman makes clear, this is a book about how the dead teach the living.

In this book, one of the important lessons the dead teach is that the dead can be very much alive in relationship to us who are alive. A medical student may apologize to a cadaver, thank it, ask it questions, and otherwise speak to it, and many medical students represented in this book clearly had ethical concerns about their relationship to the dead person whose body they dissected. For example, a student may worry about invading the person's privacy and about doing things to the cadaver that the cadaver donor never consented to. The medical student will learn about what is more sacred and personal in her/his thinking about other people's bodies by learning what aspects of dissection are harder to do (the face, for example). In some ways, the relationship between cadaver and medical student can be extremely close, and there are ways in which the medical student will never have known anyone as well as she or he knows that cadaver.

The cadavers confront those who are learning from them, as the dead generally do, with major life questions: What does it mean to be human? What is life? What will you do with your life? What, at the end of your days, will you have to show for your life? What of your humanity inheres in your body after death? What are you willing to give to others (are you even willing to donate your body to medical education)? What is it you should, can, will give to those who live after you? What do you owe to the living family members of a person whose corpse you dissect?

Some students wrote about the unity, order, and hidden beauty of the human body. One could take that as simply being about knowledge, but one could also take that as a deep and profound spiritual experience about the beauty and mystery of what evolution/God has created. Some students wrote about learning about their own body from their cadaver, or using their own body to learn about their cadaver. Imagine, for example, learning more than one knew before about how one's arm works, or using the workings of your own arm to understand what you are seeing in a cadaver's arm. But the interaction and interactive learning is not only at such a concrete level. At a more abstract level, some students seem to have learned new things about their personal freedom, pleasures, thoughts, and life force from the cold silence of their cadaver.

The book offers lessons about medical education. The students were not only reacting emotionally to death and a cadaver, they were also learners with anxieties, curiosity, and pride about their learning. As a substantial literature on medical students has shown (e.g., Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Segal, 1988; Wear, 1989; Williams, 1992), some of the learning that they struggled with was how to feel (perhaps not too upset but also not too detached) about their work with a cadaver. But it seems clear in what Bertman provides that medical education has come quite a distance in recent years in encouraging students to be human, real, and themselves. If you are curious about the curriculum for beginning medical students, why they work with a cadaver, where the cadavers come from, where they do their dissection, the social context of the dissection, and the learning that medical students will bring to their gross anatomy class, this is an interesting and educational book from that angle.

As a teacher, I found it intriguing that students were assigned to do drawings or other graphics and narratives, did them, and used the language and graphical motifs they used to speak about their experiences. The medical student artists/writers reflected where they were in personal and professional development, and the "shoulds" of medical school. Some also provided considerable information about the personal or cultural context for their reactions (e.g., one student wrote about what it was like to grow up with what she saw as an Irish Catholic attitude toward the dead and then have to violate the learned cultural rules in order to dissect a cadaver). Some students also gave a sense of how their learning and their relationship with their cadaver became routinized and

how the demands of learning vast amounts of detail about anatomy in some ways submerged the ethical, spiritual, emotional, and other issues that were initially so strong a part of their experience in the gross anatomy class. And then there is the humor, seemingly complex and diverse, some of it possibly fending off anxiety and some of it communicating anxiety, some of it denying the relationship of the living and the dead and some of it illuminating the relationship. There are quite a few lessons in this book for teachers to consider.

Bertman's book is creative and collaborative. She helps us to see, think, and feel things we would never see without her help. She not only uses the student written productions and graphics, she provides framing from and links to the larger world of art and literature, and so do some of the medical students with their drawings and writings. And yet her account of her creative process gives great credit to others, not only the medical student artists/writers, but also many colleagues and helpers. The acknowledgements and the entire book is an interesting commentary on some of the important ways in which creativity is socially embedded.

I suppose one could also take this as an art book, because there is much in the book that, like any good art book, fascinates, illuminates, and stimulates. There are, for me, some drawings, narratives, and poetry in the book that stay with me, that I return to, that pique my curiosity or get me thinking about things I had not thought about before. Maybe it would even be a quirky but very interesting coffee table book. But for those of us who focus on thanatological issues, there is the perspective and depth the book offers about what we as professionals and scholars write about, think about, and face in our every day work, matters of life and death.

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