

# Narrative Medicine: Discovering the Person within the Patient

Cynthia Unwin, Ph.D., Tasia VanderVegt, M.A.,  
Ian Reynolds, M.D., Brian Unwin, M.D.  
With Narrative Med Students from Classes of 2021-2027

Art by Uma Kelavkar



## Background

- **Narrative Medicine:** Model of practice developed in 2001 by Rita Charon, MD, PhD
- **Narrative Competence:** To absorb, interpret, and respond to patient stories
- **Purpose:** To promote empathy, reflection, professionalism, and trustworthiness
- **Explore connections between:**
  - Provider and patient
  - Provider and self
  - Provider and colleague
  - Provider and society

## Methods

- **Launched at VTCSOM in 2017** (Class of 2021)
- **General themes**
  - Longitudinal elective course through M1-M2 years
  - Meet in faculty home/shared meal/safe space
  - Substantive discussion encouraged
  - Personal and creative response form basis of exploration of self
  - Emphasis on relationship-building
- **Three phases with compositions, creative responses, and sharing**
  - Introduction and personal memoir
  - Health Narrative of a familiar person
  - Health Narrative of an unknown person and “Parallel Chart”

## Results

- 65 student participants
- Excellent student and faculty satisfaction (average 4.8/5 on course evaluations)
- Development of *Articulation* creative journal
  - Four issues since 2019
  - 39 Narrative Medicine student published pieces
  - 64 total published pieces
- Expanded faculty from 2 to 4
- Reunions initiated by students
- 15 of the 31 Gold Humanism Society Honorees from Classes of 2021-2024

## Reflections from Students

“Narrative medicine was a big reason for me to stay connected with my humanity and creativity.”

The course instructors “offer a thought-provoking and safe space for us to explore challenges of medicine, both personally and professionally, and find ways to approach some of these larger questions of being a physician, and also being a human.”

The class provided “great guidance in our writing and development as future doctors, but also as humans and thinking through how we hold all these truths in concert. I think these are things that will continue to grow and develop as we progress.”

“The Parallel Chart allows us to hold onto our humanity during medical school.”



## Conclusions

This course has illuminated the value of practicing Narrative Medicine. Narrative Medicine:

- fosters critical reflection
- builds community
- sparks creativity
- promotes self-care
- honors compassion and empathy

## Selected References

- Charon, R. (2006). *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kleinman, A. (1988). *The Illness Narrative: Suffering, Healing & the Human Condition*. New York: Basic Books.
- Albom, M. (1997). *Tuesdays with Morrie*. New York: Random House.

Hippocrates: “It is far more important to know what person the disease has, than what disease has the person.”