

The Professor

Zach Sharfman, MS

Palpable electric tension fills the air as my 64 classmates and I stand in the narrow hallway, apprehensive about entering the morgue. Each student has donned a new creased white coat and a poorly concealed nervous smile. We bump into each other, talk too loudly, and fumble with our unwieldy lab manuals.

The morning had started at 9 AM when our class, uncharacteristically, arrived on time. We were all seated well before the instructor entered the room. As the instructor outlined the history of dissection and the sacrifice each donor had made, I observed my classmates' expressions, and tallied the number of students who were excited about anatomy and the number who were dreading the next 15 weeks.

The next 2 lectures moved at an intolerably sluggish pace. Finally, we awaited entry to the sacred dissection theater that defines the first year of medical school. On crossing the threshold, the cold air stole the breath from my lungs, as I avoided the cadavers lying on dissection tables along the periphery of the auditorium. Blue cloth bags with long black zippers concealed the bodies, yet I could not help but look nervously over my shoulder from my seat in the center of the hall.

I noticed how everyone looked pale and cold under the florescent lights, oddly akin to the pallor of the deceased who surrounded us. I turned to the student on my left and said, "Hey, would you ask them to turn on the heater? It's a little cold in here for me." The tasteless joke was rewarded with brash laughter just for breaking the tension.

After a brief introduction, we were released to our assigned tables and lined up on either side of the cadaver. You could measure a student's bravery by how close he or she stood to the cadaver's head. Our lab instructor, a Russian immigrant who communicated in broken English, approached and introduced herself. During the tutor's introduction, I decided to acclimate myself to the concept of touching a cadaver. I ran the back of my gloved hand over the bag that concealed the learning aid I was most apprehensive to use.

Finally, our lab instructor invited us to unveil the cadaver. We caught our first glimpse of the lifeless

pale skin. The plastic bag under the cloth was unwrapped, and before we could react, the skull cap fell, clinking lightly on the metal table. Before I had seen this man's face, I confronted the now empty cavity where his personality and attributes had once resided.

I sensed the emotions around me: the static excitement of a future surgeon buzzing on my right, the nauseous swaying of the aspiring psychiatrist on my left, and the silent sobs of the pediatrician-to-be across the table. Other students looked numb, some disoriented, but regardless of what I tried, I felt nothing.

Over the next 15 weeks, I spent immeasurable time with the donor, who we affectionately had come to call "The Professor." He offered us his most personal possession, his body, as a learning tool. He gave me the privilege to experience firsthand what was documented in my anatomy textbooks, and he transformed the 2-dimensional prose into the 3-dimensional structures that compose the complexity of the human body.

At the end of those 15 weeks, I felt relief as I closed up The Professor for the last time. I am not sure why, but as I turned to leave, I hesitated and unzipped the bag, uncovering his face. Staring up at me through closed eyes and exposed structures, I saw the face of an elderly man I had never met in life yet knew so well in death. Overwhelmed with emotion, I paused to reflect on my experience.

I was overcome with gratitude. I silently thanked my teacher, and I told him that I would not squander his gift. I thought about how I have been fortunate to study at premier universities around the world, learning from renowned instructors with impeccable credentials. However, I had never had a teacher more influential than the one who was lying cold on the table in front of me, or one who said so little. I thought about how The Professor was there for me consistently, patient, supportive, and silent, helping me to learn and giving me his full attention.

Looking back today, as a third-year medical student, I remember the stress, anxiety, and overall importance placed on the anatomy course at my school. I did learn anatomy, but more importantly, I remember contemplating the personality, hobbies, characteristics, and humanity of the donor, as well

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-14-00785.1>

as the sacrifice he had made for my education. Now, when I feel the stress, time constraints, and fatigue of medical school attempting to depersonalize and distance the patients I see as a student, I sense the presence of The Professor. He instructs me to step back from the pathology and structure he once taught me so well, and to appreciate the entire person who has come to receive care. He reminds me to be patient, supportive, and silent; to listen; and to give my full attention, the way he had once done for me.

This is The Professor's enduring lesson that I have committed to honoring throughout the entirety of my medical education and career.



Zach Sharfman, MS, is an MD Candidate, Sackler School of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel.

Corresponding author: Zach Sharfman, MS, Sackler School of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Chiam Levanon 55, Tel Aviv 6997801 Israel, +972587015762, zachsharfman@gmail.com