

Reflection and Community Building Through Narrative Writing

In this World Shared Practice Forum Podcast, Drs. Briseida Mema and Wynne Morrison share their journeys into medical humanities, and reflect on the principles of narrative writing that resonate with healthcare workers. They explore how mentorship in narrative writing evolves through fostering connections and leads to community-building. The authors discuss the qualities of effective narrative pieces and share examples of impactful work on their professional practice.

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Jeff Burns 00:18

Welcome to the World Share Practice Forum on OPENPediatrics. I'm Dr. Jeff Burns from Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, and today we're discussing a topic that we haven't had on the OPENPediatrics podcast, and that is medical humanities, maybe in general, but more in particular, narrative writing in medicine. We have with us today, two individuals, in the view of many, who've written beautiful narrative pieces in medicine. Our first guest is Dr. Briseida Mema. She is a staff physician in the department of Critical Care Medicine at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto, and Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Toronto. Dr. Mema is the program director for the pediatric critical care medicine training program at the University of Toronto, and the Associate Chief of Education for perioperative services at Sick Kids in Toronto. Briseida, welcome.

Briseida Mema 01:16

Thank you. Dr. Burns, I'm so pleased to be here, and especially with a writer that I adore, like Dr. Morrison, so thank you for having me here.

Jeff Burns 01:26

And our second guest, as you just heard, is Dr. Wynne Morrison. Dr. Morrison is an attending physician in palliative care and critical care at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, where she is also Professor of Anesthesiology and Critical Care at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. Wynne, welcome to OPENPediatrics podcast.

Wynne Morrison 01:46

Thank you so much. I'm truly honored to be here with both of you and to have this as a topic of conversation. It's wonderful.

Jeff Burns 01:54

Well, as I mentioned just now, I'm looking forward to this. We haven't had a podcast on medical humanities in general, as I said, or certainly not on narrative writing. And so my first question, and Wynne, I'll turn to you, is, how did you get involved in narrative writing?

Wynne Morrison 02:12

*I think the interest goes back a very long time, even before medicine. For me, I was an English literature major in college at the same time that I was taking all the science courses and doing everything to qualify for pre med trying to figure out what next steps in life were for me at that time. Ended up going to medical school, but always was very interested in ethical questions the social side of medicine, and for me, humanities fit in very much with those sorts of questions. And so as I finished medical training and had a little bit more time, even though I had, you know, two small children at home, I started trying to go back to my roots in English literature and do some writing. And I will say the first poem I ever had accepted for publication, in *Pharos*, brought me as much joy as any research paper I ever published. And the more I thought about this, the more I thought that this was something that might be valuable to other healthcare providers as well. And started thinking about trying to find that community of people interested in humanities and healthcare, and how to water my own interest and the interest of others. And I think we'll probably talk more about how we all do that in this podcast.*

Jeff Burns 03:43

And Briseida, how did you get involved in narrative writing?

Briseida Mema 03:47

Oh, my, my journey is quite, quite different, actually. My first attempt at writing probably like everyone's else, was like in elementary school, when our teacher asked us to write a poem about an event. And then I took the assignment very seriously, but probably being in the concrete stage of thinking. I approached the poetry analytically. I dissected the poem and concluded that they end with rhyming words, and that ideally the syllables should match in each line. And so then what I did is I worked backwards, found two words, not even four that rhymed, and then I repeated them, and then I forced other words to build the stanzas. As one can imagine, like my approach was not particularly appreciated, and so I was gently encouraged to focus on other things. But it would be hard to find any human who does not engage with arts in some way, either as a creator or a consumer. And so having failed at the writing, I still loved reading, and I didn't think seriously about writing until I was probably like mid, early to mid-career in the ICU, because by then, I had accumulated many experiences, both personal and professional, that were weighing on me and changing me. And for a lack of a better word, I wanted to make sense of that transformation. So I wanted to have some agency over it, and it's something that—I have a lot of favorite poets, and one of them is Amanda Gorman, and she captures in one of her poems like it's about memory, renewal and identity, and she uses water as a metaphor for the transformative power of language. And it goes like: "we like the water, forget nothing, forgo everything. Words, also like the water, are a type of washing. Through them we cleanse ourselves of what we're not" and so I wanted to write by remembering my failures at the beginning. I was convinced that I lack natural talent, so I decided to rely on something else, like focus and persistence, and so I enrolled in some creative courses at U of T and even then, it didn't come easily to me writing. I often felt I'm a much better doctor than a writer, and like I question whether what I was doing had any value, and one of my professors, who I admired and learned a lot from, gave me some advice that stayed with me and encouraged me. And you know, at the beginning, he asked, does this story know why it exists? And then something even more important, yeah, there are many stories, but none of them is written by you, and at the end of the day, he said that writing enriches your life. And so that's how I got into writing, really.

Jeff Burns 06:51

That's wonderful to hear this. You know, as I prepare my next question for you, I'm thinking here, I've got a longer—I'm older than both of you. I have a longer runway on in medicine. So I was a medical student in the 80s and resident in the late 80s. And for sure, there were narrative pieces, but if you wanted to find them, you know where you would go? You go to the Journal of Medical Ethics or something. So that it was very specialized as to where to look for something like that, and candidly, you didn't see it, where you see it now, which is, you know, the high impact journals have narrative pieces. It's across medicine. What is it about a narrative piece that is so profoundly moving for so many physicians, healthcare workers. What's it tapping into? Is it us? Is it tapping into us, or is it because we're most of us are STEM based in our in our education, and we're not used to reading or expressing ourselves this way? Briseida, can I ask you what is medical narrative writing tapping into?

Briseida Mema 08:07

I think for me, it taps into two things. One is the esthetic of the language of the writing, and for me, particularly English being my second language. And you know now even forgetting my first language, I love when sometimes I read a narrative that has beautiful sounds, arrangement, rhythm, sentences and but most importantly, it helps me with that transformation I was talking about. And I love the transformation power of those pieces, what the writing is actually doing to me, because those narratives do not simply describe an experience. It shifts something into me as a reader. It offers a new perspective, a deeper understanding, or sometimes helps me see something familiar in a very different way, and I can also talk about one of my favorite pieces, but I would let Wynne answer first.

Jeff Burns 09:34

Wynne, now over to you. What is it about narrative writing that clearly moves us. And as I described, has really now, you know, every, every journal that I can think of has a place for narrative writing, which it didn't, you know, three or four decades ago.

Wynne Morrison 09:51

I completely agree with everything that you said, Briseida, and I also, I think so many people in medicine deal with challenging situations, whether emotionally challenging, just even physical workload challenging, human interaction, things that can be inspiring, but things that can also be very, very hard. And so many healthcare providers, I think this is as true of pediatric critical care as any field may feel if they make a mistake, like, I'm the only one that ever made a mistake, or if they had a family yell at them like, Ah, that was my fault. That family yelled at me, I'm the worst doctor ever, and things of that sort. I think sharing stories and narratives can help all of us not feel alone at times, and I think that is one of the reasons they really resonate. If we've had things that we have struggled to process or understand or make sense of in our own careers, seeing someone else work through that in what they are writing can help us recognize that camaraderie, those shared experiences, the sorts of things that I think can help us focus on what's inspiring in what we do and keep going in a way.

Jeff Burns 11:16

Your eloquence is both of you is coming through in the spoken word here, because I'm finding your words and you're really capturing me. Wynne can I turn to you for the next question? And that is, I'm sure every writer has pieces that you know they stand by and think you know that one, you know, I express exactly what I wanted to express, and I, I probably wouldn't change it much. And in other cases, there are probably some pieces that you've written where you think, Oh, I would do that over. What makes an effective narrative piece in your mind. And in retrospect, if, if there were pieces that you felt either really hit the mark, and to this day, you feel like that hit the mark I was trying to achieve, and in others, it didn't. How does one judge that?

Wynne Morrison 12:13

It's a great question. In looking back on things I have written, I also, as was mentioned earlier, have a failing of being overly analytical at times. And I find the things that stick with me that I feel like when I go back to later and say, like, wow, I had something to say there. It's when I can get out of that analytical space and come back to the more personal, human, even if it's incomplete. And so, and I've published, plenty of really bad poems, by the way, and so anyone who's considering being a poet, don't judge yourself. Just get it out there. And some of them will be good, and some won't. And so in hindsight, I don't think I can say I regret the ones that were maybe didn't hit the mark, or weren't that great, because it's all a part of the process, and it's all about learning, even if I might look back and say,

Yeah, that was, that was immature work. There was still something there, and maybe someone connected with it. And I can, I can never predict which things I write someone will connect with. When I've shared poetry and readings in other areas, I get different responses from different people all the time as far as what means something to them. So that part I can't predict, I can put it out in the world, and someone may take something from it, someone may not, and it's part of the growth and the life and the history of that piece of creative work that we just let go.

Jeff Burns 13:51

And Briseida, could I turn to you and you were so eloquent a couple of minutes ago, talking about your writing career, from elementary school to encouragement from your professor at the University of Toronto, Briseida, what makes an effective narrative piece?

Briseida Mema 14:06

I think, like I would go back to what I said before, right is the transformational power of that piece. For example, Wynne, I don't want to embarrass you, but I want to talk about a piece that you have written, and that is my very favorite narrative piece, and it's the inaugural verse that you wrote for the narrative in verse section "When one of them breaks." And I'm a bit hesitant to bring it up, but, but I love that piece because it begins with an epigraph by poet Tony Hoagland, "We would give anything for what we have." That line captures something essential about perspective, and it has helped and changed my perspective on work. And this is a poem that I return to often, especially when I'm on clinical service. And I've shared it with friends and colleagues during a difficult time at work. And in fact, may be the poem I have read the most, and what makes the piece so powerful is that they help us see our work differently. In critical care, we encounter suffering almost every day, and that can quietly shape the way we experience our own lives and I think this poem captures that very beautifully. Every time I read it, I read that line about, for example, the feeling of the guilt of gratitude and that, that phrase captures the feeling many clinicians know but rarely articulate. When you work so closely with suffering, you become intensely aware how fragile life is and, and a good narrative, also, just like this poem, doesn't resolve the tension. Instead, it holds it gently and, and maybe Wynne can recite it for us, but the physician crawls into bed next to her partner, grateful for the quiet, ordinary moment, yet aware that the day has shown her everything that could be lost. And I think a good narrative in medicine can be memorable because it gives language to emotion we often carry silently, like in this poem, is gratitude, vulnerability, humility, even guilt. And when I read this it, it makes me reconnect to the meaning of the work we do.

Jeff Burns 16:59

What a beautiful comment. The beauty of doing this podcast is sometimes it goes in directions that you know I didn't anticipate. Wynne, what a lovely comment. Could I ask you, Wynne first, could you give us a citation for the piece that Briseida is referring to, just a rough citation. And then secondly, what motivated you to write this piece, and are there any lines that you recall from that piece as Briseida just did, that you'd like to share?

Wynne Morrison 17:35

Well, well, first you're about to make me cry. So it's and it's so meaningful to me, because I felt like I was going out on a such a limb telling Dr. Tasker, you know, "Hey, I've got this poem. Can we put a poem in a narrative? Can we start that on occasion?" And, you know, very worried that that would not be received well. That poem, interestingly enough, grew out of an exercise, like a, you know, try this out as a prompt, which is amazing that then it led me to share so much about what I was feeling inside

about life and work. It's published in *Pediatric Critical Care Medicine*. It's in the PCCM narrative section, which now does sometimes accept poems as well as narrative essays, very personal essays, and I can't remember what year, but I can find it later if you want that Jeff or pull it up. For me, one of the lines that really hit home was an interaction with my daughter after I heard about a patient death. She didn't have any idea what I was hearing about, but she just came up and gave me a hug, because she could tell that something was, you know, in my face, that you know, had affected me. And the exercise for that poem was, I believe it was something to try to end every line with a similar consonant sound, and you can't even tell that probably reading the poem now, but it gave me a framework to let so many things that were bubbling up inside me and that I dealt with at work come out on the page. So sometimes you never know what might emerge. And I think that's an amazing thing about writing, is that sometimes you discover things in the writing. And a mentor once said to me, don't try to write about something. Try to write into it, which was great, like, don't try to control it, let it emerge.

Jeff Burns 19:48

I found the citation. It is, as Briseida said, it's entitled, at least in PubMed, "A PCCM Narrative, in Verse," and it's in *Pediatric Critical Care Medicine*, as you noted, when October 2022, issue. Wow, I'm kind of speechless left at that episode. Let me turn to this, and I can't remember who I'm going to first here, I'm going to go to you to Briseida. Briseida, you and I were at a meeting, oh, last summer sometime, and you mentioned to me that, you know, as I mentioned earlier in the introduction, you're the program director for the fellowship in critical care at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, and you said, Well, I have people over to my home in the evenings, and it's not just for the fellows, but it's actually for the faculty too, and we come share our writings. And so my question is about mentorship, and perhaps you could tell us a little bit about, you know this, I won't call it a program is, but it's, it's a gathering, but it's more than at once. It's a regular event. Yeah, thank you.

Briseida Mema 21:01

Thank you for asking that. Jeff and I think if I reflected about my writing and why I keep writing narratives. I think perhaps the greatest support for my writing has been the community. And since 2019 at Sick Kids, we have run a humanities program, which is a series of monthly evenings dedicated to reflection through creativity and art. And each year, two of those evenings are dedicated to writing narrative poetry or other forms, and usually there is a prompt. But the participants don't have to follow the prompt. They can write about something that they want to make sense of. And much of my writing has been shaped within that community, because through those evenings, colleagues read each other's work and offer thoughtful feedback while protecting voice, honoring differences and supporting the courage it takes to write publicly about private weight. And so in doing so, individual experiences begin to transform into something shared, and that has been the most impact that those evening have had on participants. When this individual experiences gives voice and we transform or make sense of them together while supporting each other to create.

Jeff Burns 22:46

And Briseida, again, I know this is not exclusively for the faculty, but it's but it's really the community of you at Sick Kids, I have to believe that this is brought you all closer together, or understanding each other in a way that you otherwise would never have in a busy week of conference schedules.

Briseida Mema 23:09

Yeah, so we actually also wrote about this in, I think it was *Intensive Care Medicine Journal*, about how art allows us to express things that we would not be able to express otherwise, because you can hold a multitude of emotions, sometimes multitudes of truth and a multitude of perspectives. But also arts makes it easy for us to show vulnerabilities and our authentic selves, because it's while, like you know, people have argued this for ages. Art is about emotion, and also art is open to interpretation. And so sometimes there is a safety within expressing through art, and that vulnerability and authenticity makes us have authentic connection. And so that has helped us build, like, stronger relationships. But also something that I have observed and others is that we collaborate a lot in medicine, like we're doing this podcast together. We write manuscripts together, like, you know, you look at manuscripts authors, and then there are five and 10, sometimes 20 people. We collaborate in patient care together. Sometimes we have, like, five to 10 consultants for a patient, but we don't co construct or build something emotional together. And in these evenings, we have done that. And so, for example, Jeff, I showed you that prompt. From Niall Williams book, "This is Happiness" that was about moment that held a gleaming and then the prompt made people write about the time concept in ICU from multiple perspectives. So together, we make a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what time means for us in ICU and for the parents and our patients. So yes, that's my long winded explanation.

Jeff Burns 25:15

Oh no, it's great hearing about that program, and I'm sure colleagues around the world are going to be fascinated by that. Wynne can I turn to you? And you know, broadly, I guess the question is about mentorship and how you mentor, and as I begin or end the question, when I distinctly remember you telling me about how much you enjoyed going to the Bread Loaf Writers Conference at Middlebury College, and found certainly there a community of like-minded people who were seeking out really an intense writing community. But Wynne you're far into your writing career. Can narrative writing be mentored? And if so are, do you have examples of how it's done?

Wynne Morrison 26:02

Ah, yes, I do think it is possible to mentor writing. A big part of it always has to be through listening. I think, as you said earlier, it's you know, only you could write that story, Briseida, right? It's a you know, like you can't write someone's story for them, but you can help them see areas the way you're seeing them of something they have written to maybe make suggestions of things to focus more on, or things to focus less on I as an editor, as in the journal, I strongly feel that it's difficult for me to tell someone else how they have to change something that I'm usually making suggestions and getting them to think about it. Now, of course, the editor is in a position of power and can end up saying yes or no to whether something gets accepted based on what suggestion someone accepts. But I don't feel like I can tell them how to do it. I am also a perpetual student. I remember that Bread Loaf experience well that I told you about Jeff, but I'm now in a master's program for creative writing, despite how much I have been writing in my life at the Warren Wilson program in Asheville, North Carolina, because I feel like there is always more to learn, and maybe it's a failing to want to be a perpetual student, but I love it, and so I feel like I have more to learn and can benefit from mentorship at the same time that I'm helping others. And we have, we've, it's certainly not all my doing. We've got a group at the Children's Hospital here that is nurturing the humanities very much so, and have gotten residents engaged. And the chiefs who feel like you know, one of them said recently, this connects us more than anything. We have a monthly evening session. It's not extremely well attended, but anyone from any discipline can attend. It's not restricted to any division or any you know, there's physicians, nurses, social workers from all over the hospital. We have an annual small conference dedicated to the humanities, and we have a literary

journal, and I wasn't the leader of any of these things my—many of my colleagues here were like particularly Madhura Pradhan, who's one of the nephrologists, but I think community building is the main goal of all of these efforts, and it's making the difference one person at a time.

Jeff Burns 28:44

Yeah, I wonder if I could turn to you both now and Wynne, perhaps we could begin with you. Could you share with us a book or a narrative piece that's really had a profound impact on you and perhaps helped you reflect more deeply on your professional practice.

Wynne Morrison 29:04

It's almost impossible to think about one book for me or one piece. I will give one recent example. I just this morning finished Anthony Fauci's memoir, "On Call" about his over 50-year career the NIH, and I think that was a great example of using story to reflect on history and science in a very memorable way, and a career in public service in a way that can be inspiring. So it's an example of how story can hit home. And then I have to name a poet, so I will also say John Stone, who was a cardiologist at Emory and a poet who always wrote things that were incredibly meaningful to me. And one reason was because it was so clear how much he cared about the other people he worked with, whether that was students or other healthcare providers or his patients. And that caring would shine through in so many things that he wrote and speaks to that connection that I really think that narrative can make for all of us.

Jeff Burns 30:25

And Briseida?

Briseida Mema 30:26

Yeah, just like Wynne said, it's very difficult, but I'm a fan of the writing of Dr. Abraham Verghese, and one of my favorite book is his "Cutting for Stone", and the writing is beautiful, and he has a remarkable sense of when to linger in the moment, when to move the story forward, and how he situates the medicine within the social, political and religious reality of people's lives. And it captures also something very true about our profession in medicine, like how demanding it is, yet one that offers very deep meaning and fulfillment. And because I grew up in Albania, which used to be a communist country, I read a lot of Russian literature. And one book that I re-discovered lately is "Fathers and Sons" of Turgenev, and I probably reread this book. I had read it before, but it captures so deeply the grief that the parents carry when they lose a child, and it shows how it's not something that resolves with time, it becomes something that they live with and carry quietly for the rest of their lives. And reading it helped me better understand the depth and the permanence of that loss, which is something we encounter often in medicine, but never fully comprehend unless we pause to reflect it.

Jeff Burns 32:04

Your comments, your both, your comments are so poignant and thought provoking. One last question. Wynne, let me turn to you first, final thoughts?

Wynne Morrison 32:15

Final thoughts. I've had so many former fellows and current fellows, trainees that I have taught, who hear that I am a writer, who come to me somewhat shyly saying, "will you look at something that I have written," and I just want to say that that is an honor and an inspiration, and something that makes me

super excited, that someone would want to share in that way, just because they've seen that this is something I love to do, and encourage people to find those people out there who want to hear about them and what they think.

Jeff Burns 33:02

And Briseida, your final thoughts?

Briseida Mema 33:06

I thought about it like because when you send that question, because I don't know whether narrative writing will become more prominent in medicine or less so. But I'm certain it will continue to exist, because storytelling and meaning making are essential part of being human. And I wanted to bring a passage from Eavan Boland's poetry, because it's, it's the ending of a poem where she said: "in the end, everything that burdened and distinguished me will be lost in this. I was a voice." And I think that in the end, narrative writing will have a future in medicine, not that every story will change the world, but that clinicians will continue to bear witness of what they see and feel and then give language to experience that might otherwise remain unspoken. So in the end, perhaps that is enough making sure that what we witnessed what it meant was not lost to silence. That we were voices.

Jeff Burns 34:11

Well, I have to tell you both, this has been a very moving podcast. So Dr. Briseida Mema from the Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto, and Dr. Wynne Morrison from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, thank you for sharing your thoughts and your experience with narrative writing.

Sarah Marcley 34:30

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