

MEDIA

Learning the art of healing

Healing Through Humanism: A 5-DVD

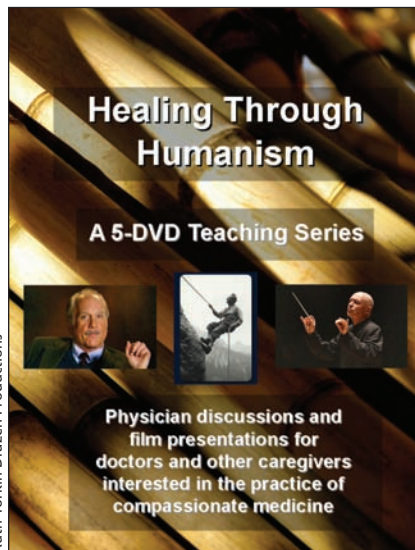
Teaching Series

Ruth Yorkin Drazen, Director

Ruth Yorkin Drazen Productions, Inc.; 2011

A paradox lies at the heart of contemporary medicine. We are blessed by the remarkable growth of medical science, technology and health care accessibility. Today we can treat disease more effectively than ever before. The health care industry is one of the largest and most powerful segments of our economy. The average person justifiably expects to enjoy a long, healthy life. Yet, at the same time, many of us believe that something important is missing. A deep undercurrent of dissatisfaction with medical care pervades our society. We may be “doing better,” but at the same time we are “feeling worse.”¹

Nowhere is this more evident than in the care of terminally ill patients. Although medicine now has technical means in most cases to prolong life and relieve symptoms, many dying patients experience unnecessary pain and suffering largely because their doctors have lost sight of the art of compassionate care. Transfixed by the lure of drugs and procedures, young physicians may fail



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an empathic connection. This emotional abandonment can lead to patient dissatisfaction and physician disillusion and burnout.

Filmmaker Ruth Yorkin Drazen addresses the human dimension of medicine in *Healing Through Humanism*, a five DVD educational module designed for medical students, residents, fellows, and other health care professionals. Drazen, whose award-winning films include *Notes from the Edge: The Diary of Peter J. Morgan*, *Frankl's Choice*, *The Choice Is Yours*, and *A Wayfarer's*

chapter consists of material from Ruth Drazen's earlier films, chosen to illustrate key concepts in the art of healing and to provoke discussion.

Chapter 1, “The Journey to Healing,” contrasts the risk of depersonalization and burnout, to which unprepared physicians are susceptible, with the potential for psychological self-healing, as illustrated by Dr. Peter J. Morgan, who experienced an emotional and spiritual transformation that allowed him to better help his own patients during the course of his ultimately unsuccessful struggle against cancer. Chapter 2, “Sharing the Illness Experience,” features commentary by three physicians about their personal encounters with cancer. It illustrates the key roles of attentive listening and empathic understanding in compassionate care. Chapter 3, “The Search for Inner Strength,” explores the creative arts as resources in developing emotional resilience and providing therapeutic release for patient and physician. The film features, in particular, the role of music, illustrated by *A Wayfarer's Journey*, Drazen's film about Gustav Mahler's struggle to achieve healing and transcendence. Chapter 4, “Confronting Despair,” continues to explore Mahler's life and features a discussion of death anxiety, honesty, and telling bad news. The final chapter, “All Real Living Is Meeting,” presents excerpts from “The Choice Is Yours,” in which Dr. Viktor Frankl discusses the concept of achieving self-transcendence through love, dignity, and service to others.

Overall, *Healing Through Humanism* provides a compelling educational experience, appropriate at all levels of health professional education, but especially for clinical clerkships and postgraduate training. The word “healing” in the title refers, initially at least, to self-healing. The films' key message is that physicians become more effective healers through

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to understand illness from their patients' perspective and to reflect on their own emotional reactions to the suffering they encounter. Attentiveness, empathy, solidarity, witnessing: these skills are often relegated to the periphery as “touchy-feely” options, rather than the heart of medical practice. Some trainees believe they should maintain “clinical distance” from their patients, rather than creating

Journey, all aired on the Public Broadcasting System, has framed the five programs (or “chapters”) with selections from a panel discussion chaired by Dr. Bruce Chabner, Director of Clinical Research at Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center, and consisting of two senior oncologists, a psychiatrist, a physician cancer-survivor, and two oncology fellows. The core of each

reflective practice and growth in personal awareness, a concept of crucial importance for all clinicians and not just for those specializing in palliative medicine.

Healing Through Humanisms is far more ambitious and comprehensive than earlier DVDs that limit their focus to the role of poetry or literature in medical education and practice. For example, *Healing Words: Poetry & Medicine* (2008)² illustrates the healing power of poetry in a number of clinical and educational contexts, and *Medicine and Humanistic Understanding. The Significance of Literature in Medical Practice*

(2005)³ delves more generally into the value of literary works in teaching and maintaining clinical skills. Each of these films is an excellent introduction to its subject, but neither offers sustained attention to the physician's personal qualities and emotional core, as presented by *Healing Through Humanism*.

I strongly recommend *Healing Through Humanism* for medical residents, fellows in oncology, geriatrics, and palliative medicine, and other health care professionals. It is a curriculum that contributes significantly toward a new humanism in medicine.

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Reference

1. Knowles J. *Doing Better, but Feeling Worse. Health in the United States*. New York (NY): W.W. Norton; 1977.
2. *Healing Words. Poetry & Medicine* [DVD]. Arlington (VA): Public Broadcasting System; 2008.
3. *Medicine and Humanistic Understanding. The Significance of Literature in Medical Practice* [DVD]. Philadelphia (PA): University of Pennsylvania Press; 2005.

CMAJ 2013. DOI:10.1503/cmaj.121398