



Medical Humanities and the Arts

My Photography: My Being in the Flow

Thomas R. Vetter, MD, MPH, MFA

The British-American poet W.H. Auden waxed in “Sext” – part three of “Horae Canonicae,” a series of his poems, first published in a 1955 collection, titled “The Shield of Achilles” (The Shield of Achilles. 1955):

*You need not see what someone is doing
to know if it is his vocation,
you have only to watch his eyes:
a cook mixing a sauce, a surgeon
making a primary incision,
a clerk completing a bill of lading,
wear the same rapt expression,
forgetting themselves in a function.
How beautiful it is,
that eye-on-the-object look.*

A generation later, in his 1990 book “Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience,” the Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi proposed the concept of flow as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. 1990). Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” is not hedonism – instead, it is when



Soaptree Yuccas Under West Texas Sky (© Thomas R. Vetter 2017).

your whole being is engaged in an activity and you are using your skills to the utmost. Time both stands still and flies by.

Auden and Csikszentmihalyi describe my experience when I am engrossed in my landscape photography.

As I approached my 60th birthday in 2017, I considered celebrating it by visiting Asia, specifically, Japan, for the first time. An acute spike in political posturing on the Korean Peninsula, and the thin-veiled

threat by Kim Jong-un to lob a nuke on a neighboring country, prompted me to reconsider. I defaulted to a road trip to West Texas. For native Texans, and transplanted ones like me, the Big Bend in West Texas is as revered as the Texas Hill Country.

One mid-November morning, with my camera gear close at hand, I drove counterclockwise around the Davis Mountains Scenic Loop, a 75-mile stretch of Texas 118 and Texas 166. Anchored to the east by the



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town of Fort Davis, this loop is the highest public byway in the state. It vies with El Camino del Rio, the stretch of Farm to Market Road 170 tracing the Rio Grande River just west of the ghost town of Terlingua, as the most scenic stretch in Texas.

I was soon in my zone of nirvana. Auden observed me forgetting myself in a function. Csikszentmihalyi noted my being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. My camera’s eye and my human eye became one. Time lost its normal cadence and became fluid. I captured image after image, intoxicated by the high desert light, vegetation, and vistas. The nearly vacant two lanes of asphalt were my space-time conduit and the through line of my adventure: an adventure that etched a long-term memory in my cerebrum (asamonitor.pub/3BR5FBr).

And, oh, by the way, I eventually visited Japan in November 2019, and it was equally magical. ■

A Brief Guide on Mouth to Mouth

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Poetry plays different roles for different people, and this poem plays two in particular for me. First, reading and writing poetry often provides space to reflect, process, analyze, and sometimes agonize over my clinical work. This includes mistakes. In “A Brief Guide on Mouth to Mouth,” I wrestle with guilt, shame, and fear from bad outcomes. The poem’s narrative is actually a fictional synthesis of two patient encounters that still haunt me years later. The form of any poem should serve its subject, and here the woven repetition of this specific form, the pantoum, mirrors how my mind returns repeatedly to these patients: each line appears twice (the second and fourth line become the first and third in the subsequent stanza) until the end, where two lines from the first stanza re-

A Brief Guide on Mouth to Mouth

<p>If the patient isn't breathing, be prepared to do it (despite the fear of those blue lips) while her body decides.</p> <p>Be prepared to do it --owing to those vows you've taken. While her body decides, recall all the training you've received</p> <p>owing to those vows. You've taken her face in your hands. Now you recall all the training you've received to exhale into her. Hopefully, her chest rises.</p>	<p>Her face in your hands, now you breathe again and again and again. Continue to exhale into her hopefully. Her chest rises while you do the work for two.</p> <p>Breathe again. And again. And again. Continue despite the fear of those blue lips while you do the work for two if the patient isn't breathing.</p> <p>© Douglas L. Hester 2022</p>
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appear to “close” the poem (asamonitor.pub/3hHVkaf). This required repetition also allows for variation via grammar or context and can reveal more depth, nuance, or ambiguity.

The second role for me in poetry is one of growth. The technical requirements of poetry (especially formal poetry) often distract my consciousness, allowing my subconscious a chance to communicate.



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The concentration required for the arrangement of words in a certain way sometimes lets the truth slip out. I learn about myself by writing, although it is a strange epistemological source. In writing this poem, I realized how my promises are at least as important as my preparations. Ultimately, for me, these two roles resonate with each other: the place of brooding is also the place of discovery. The structured introspection of poetry is a way to incorporate mindfulness into my clinical practice. ■