



Medical Humanities and the Arts

Modern Pen Pals: Music, Books, Friendship, and Advocacy

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"Kindred spirits are not so scarce as I used to think. It's splendid to find out there are so many of them in the world."

L.M. Montgomery,
Anne of Green Gables
(Anne of Green Gables. 1908)

We may both be academic pediatric anesthesiologists, but that has little to do with how we met or became dear friends and colleagues. Our relationship is rooted in the humanities. Creativity in the midst of chaos sparked our friendship and fuels our music, joy, and advocacy.

Twitter

Twitter, a social media platform best known for its vitriolic mudslinging, is not the place where one might envision the start of a modern pen pal relationship, but it is where our cross-country professional and personal relationship was born. Indeed, it is unlikely that two pediatric anesthesiologists at major children's hospitals would first meet online, rather than at a national meeting for ASA or the Society for Pediatric Anesthesia. Yet Twitter provided a platform for our budding modern relationship, built on a mutual love for music and literature. We discovered a shared need to keep our heads above the water of a pandemic, academic careers, and family responsibilities.

Pandemic music

A combination of the pandemic, doomscrolling^a, and our love of making music flung us together. Near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we both joined a ragtag group of clinicians, calling ourselves "Docs Who Rock (#DocsWhoRock)," who would post songs each week to amuse each other. We curated our creative impulses into 140-second videos (the maximum video length on the platform). We were already excellent clinicians. We didn't need to post perfect, prepared music.

^aDoomscrolling: the practice of obsessively checking online news for updates, especially on social media feeds, with the expectation that the news will be bad, such that the feeling of dread from this negative expectation fuels a compulsion to continue looking for updates in a self-perpetuating cycle. Dictionary.com, Accessed October 6, 2022.



Amy Vinson at the piano. Photo courtesy of Amy Vinson.

Instead, we shared our musical journeys and had fun during the scary, depressing, tumultuous days of 2020. Creating something simple and beautiful in the midst of chaos empowered us.

#DocsWhoRock created a space where we could celebrate our amateurism and love of music. Each week, someone would announce a theme, and we would get to work after our kids were asleep, or between clinic patients. The two of us bonded over a love of lyrically driven guitar songs, performing and posting duets to entertain our

friends. Amy eventually revealed her incredible talents as a pianist as well. Some found a love of production and created tremendous compilations. At certain pivotal points, groups joined together to express shared and collective experiences in a four-part harmony.

Soon, we were both writing our own music, including Amy's song about her experience in isolation with COVID and Alyssa's tribute to health care workers exhausted by the delta wave (asamonitor.pub/3H4rctp; asamonitor.pub/3GFsysZ).



Dr. Burgart playing guitar at the Stanford Stuck @ Home live concert. Credit: Steve Fisch.



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The #DocsWhoRock group continues to grow and now has a wonderful, supportive group of clinicians from across health care specialties, all levels of training, and all musical abilities (asamonitor.pub/3kb1D0C). All are welcome. All are celebrated. All are affirmed. We both continue to draw strength from #DocsWhoRock and our love of music.

Pen pals

In short order, the two of us were texting, talking on the phone after work, and sending each other coast-to-coast postcards and care packages. We discovered a shared love of the Anne of Green Gables series, our spouses, our children, and our dogs. In the combination of Amy's well-being advocacy and Alyssa's ethics work, we found a powerful combination of interests spanning medical culture. We confide in each other after difficult cases caring for critically ill children. We share deep, existential conversations about faith, spirituality, and humanity. We brainstorm how to use our individual platforms and positions to push for improved culture in medicine and society.

Books

In the darkness of 2020, we found ourselves nostalgic for books from our childhoods. The Anne of Green Gables series follows a voracious, creative young woman through profound adversity (Anne of Green Gables. 1908). Equally important to us is the true

love between the characters Anne and Diana. Spontaneously leaning into these particular books created a bond in and of itself. As voracious readers, we are both drawn to strong female characters facing deeply human challenges. Our nonfiction reading lists highlight our commitment to human dignity and kind-spiritedness, ranging from workplace dynamics to historical and modern social issues.

Advocacy

When the *Dobbs* decision was leaked in June 2022, we anxiously texted about the risks to pregnant patients and colleagues. When the decision was rendered, we realized voices like ours weren't included in anesthesiology in the ways we had assumed. We needed to stand up for our patients and colleagues who need ongoing access to comprehensive reproductive care, including access to excellent anesthesiologists. The Venn diagram of our bicoastal professional relationships led us to combine forces and gather as many people in anesthesiology as possible to amplify like-minded voices. We quickly learned from dozens of other seasoned

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leaders in anesthesiology how to navigate the ASA system: writing resolutions and supporting colleagues in presenting at the

Board of Directors meeting. With lightning speed, we jointly wrote an article for MedPage Today with Harriet Hopf, Christina Menor, and Linda Hertzberg, educating colleagues on the potential fallout for large swaths of society due to the *Dobbs* decision ([asamonitor.org/31M-mx0d](https://asamonitor.org/monitor/article-pdf/18/7/3/20/582955/202303000-0-00016.pdf)). Nearly 100 anesthesiologists publicly supported the work, calling for access to all aspects of reproductive health care.

Nothing about taking this stand was easy – it was our strong friendship that made it possible.

A vocation ... and avocation

“While medicine is to be your vocation, or calling, see to it that you also have an avocation... some intellectual pastime which may serve to keep you in touch with the world of art, of science, or of letters. Begin at once the cultivation of something other than the purely professional.” – Sir William Osler (Aequanimitas: With Other Addresses to Medical Students, Nurses and Practitioners of Medicine. 1932).

William Osler understood that an enduring medical career requires more than clinical skills and technical knowledge.

Humanism in medicine is rooted in connection – one person to another, one interaction after another – repeated across the breadth of one's life and profession. In a too-often segmented professional world, we choose to bring our whole selves to the table. This is the great common strength we find in each other.

In times of great turmoil and stress, we stand together in friendship. As individuals in the medical community, we have always been, and continue to be, our strongest source of support. Cultivation of friendship within medical communities, as simple as it sounds, strengthens the workforce and helps sustain the health care system through these dark years.

The fact that we are both pediatric anesthesiologists feels almost outside the core of our relationship. We are more than physicians. We are musical friends. We are parents. We have a deep and abiding relationship founded on mutual joy and respect for meaning-making. In embracing a fully human existence, we have connected and created so much joy spanning thousands of miles.

We look forward to meeting in person one of these days... ■

Musings from a Musician-Anesthesiologist

Jennifer R. Basarab-Tung, MD

My musical journey began with the piano, and although I have been out of practice for many years, I still enjoy playing pieces from the classical and romantic eras. Piano was my gateway into singing, as I served as the accompanist for choral groups and played in the pit orchestra for musicals in high school. But it was in college that I discovered my passion for singing the great choral masterworks of composers such as Mozart, Vivaldi, and Fauré. From then on, whenever I moved to a new area and started a new chapter of life, one of the first things I would do is find a community choir to join. Years later, through the contacts I made in choral and theater groups, I found a voice teacher who elevated my singing to new heights as a dramatic coloratura soprano. I continue to sing with choral groups but have more recently also begun to perform as an operatic soloist, favoring the intricate and high-flying passages of Mozart, Rossini, and Bellini's soprano heroines.

Singing (especially in a choir) brings me joy, peace, growth, and a connection to my community. There is something magical that happens when dozens of human voices blend together to create harmony; the whole emerges as something



complex, beautiful, and much greater than the sum of its parts. Singing and listening to choral music brings me into a state of flow and mindfulness like nothing else can. Learning new repertoire can be an exciting challenge, and I enjoy working toward the goal of a performance and witnessing the growth in my skills with

deliberate practice (even if that practice involved working with my voice teacher over video chat rather than in person). Working together with musicians from all walks of life toward a common goal feels like a symbolic step toward a better future. It's actually quite similar to the well-oiled machine of an OR team – each person



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knowing and executing their part with skill and care, and the conductor keeping us together as a strong team leader.

On a more everyday level, my musical interests have deepened my connections with the people around me. It's a great conversation starter and particularly exciting to find someone who shares a similar interest. I've even performed at talent shows and parties with other musically inclined colleagues and have been to concerts and productions with those who appreciate the arts. It serves as a reminder that the people we see primarily as coworkers (and by extension, the patients we care for) also have their own complex lives with plenty of interests, talents, and activities. We are all so much more than just another face hidden by a mask and scrubs.

For these reasons, the pandemic-related shutdowns were particularly difficult for ensemble musicians, but I am ecstatic to be able to rehearse and perform again, finally! ■