

A Step Outside

Ronald V. Marino, DO, MPH

The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. — Albert Einstein¹

During the early 1970s, I spent a good deal of time on the zafu with a group of Zen meditators. I also began the practice of hatha yoga. The experiences were centering, but I never felt as if I truly connected to the transcendence that I had hoped to find. The clarity I gained from meditation and yoga, however, did allow me to find my life's direction: I was to be a physician. I cast my fate to the roulette wheel of medical school admission circa 1973. To my delight, I was accepted to a wonderful university in a Midwestern state that I had never visited. I was honored that the universe was providing me with an education that would allow me to fulfill my dream and perhaps make some difference in the world.

Voraciously and with a sense of awe and wonder, I studied the introductory tenets of biochemistry, histology, anatomy, sociology, molecular biology, and physiology. How magnificent that perfection existed on so many levels, from cellular to social to cultural to community!

It was during an anatomy examination that I awakened to the transcendence I had been seeking. The setting was an anatomy practicum with 25 bodies or parts of bodies in an anatomy laboratory, each with a test question about a particular body region. With clipboard in hand, each of the 25 students took his or her place next to an assigned cadaver. We were allotted 2 minutes to answer the question at that station, at which time a bell rang and we each progressed to the

next station. Two minutes can be a very long time because, in anatomy, you either know the answer or you don't; 15 seconds is adequate for most test takers.

There I was, looking at a man's head and face. There was a pin over his eyebrow and a question about what nerve supplied the muscles in that region of the head. Bingo! I knew the answer and immediately wrote it on my test paper, leaving me more than 1 minute 45 seconds before I could advance to the next station. As I gazed at the man's face, I gently thanked him for donating his body in order for me to learn. I conceived his life, his loves, and his family. Again, I appreciated the perfection of the human body on every level and the wonderful way it maintains homeostasis through physiology.

Magnificent perfection. My heart opened to this sense of awe and perfection, and it was at that moment that I realized I was no longer in my body. I looked down and saw 25 white-coated individuals studying in an orderly anatomy laboratory. I was one of them, but my consciousness had separated from my physical being and risen above the test stations. The experience was expansive and godlike, and I was at peace.

The bell rang to signal that we were to advance to the next test station. I was instantly back in my body, being a medical student and doing what a medical student does.

That was more than 35 years ago. I continue the practice of yoga and meditation. The reality of expanded perception has influenced my medical care and yoga teaching in ways known and unknown. The experience placed human suffering and disability into a context that made them a part of the whole fabric of human experience; they were something to be recognized and compassionately addressed, not feared.

Validation that I was on the right path was captured in a line from the song "The Balance" by The Moody Blues:

*And he saw magnificent perfection
Whereon he thought of himself in balance
And he knew he was*

Reference

1. Einstein A. *The World As I See It*. New York, NY: Philosophical Library; 1949.

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Address correspondence to Ronald V. Marino, DO, MPH, Associate Chairman, Pediatrics, Winthrop University Hospital, Program Director, Pediatric Residency, Good Samaritan Hospital Medical Center, 222 Station Plaza N Suite 611, Mineola, NY 11501-3893.

E-mail: rmarino@winthrop.org

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