Reflective Writing in Medicine

Adapted from Emily Joachim’s workshop on March 30, 2017
Why reflective writing?

- We experience A LOT during medical training
  - Deal with life-and-death situations, difficult situations or patients, sleep deprivation, balancing work and life
  - Memorable patients, good outcomes, supporting patients or families

- We don’t really ever get much opportunity to reflect on these or share our experiences with others.
The 6-word story

- Most “famous” example allegedly written by Earnest Hemmingway
- For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn.
The 55-word story

- Form of “Drabble” – short work of fiction of ~100 words
“Before He Died” by Mary E. Fry

Sixty years he’s lived with diabetes. Wife, home, legs gone. Heart bad. He loves his daughter, his new prostheses, life, and me. Leaving the hospital he says, “I’d kiss you, Doc, but I’m afraid I couldn’t stop.” He does kiss me, then, on the lips, hard. I’m startled, disgusted, awed by his willingness to lose.
Physical Diagnosis I

“I’m going to do your exam now.”
Unsure.
Pull out the blood pressure cuff, untwist the curly cord
Which side by the skin?
Pen in my mouth, stethoscope in my ears
Cord snaps back and hits her cheek…
I need another hand or three.
“Don’t worry,” I say ruefully.
“They don’t give me anything sharp.”

Kristen Goodell, MD, Tufts University School of Medicine, Boston

Dialysis

“You can’t do this! Please start dialysis.”
“Janet, I’m ready to die now.”
“It’s not fair to June. She took care of you these last eight years.
Just wait till she comes home from her surgery?
Just take dialysis until then. Do it for June!”
“Janet, it’s June. No dialysis...It’s time...Let Mom go.
”

Farion R. Williams, MD, Dixon Rural Training Track in Family Medicine, Rockford, IL

Project 6-55

- Reflect on patients or experiences you have had recently
  - Can be positive or negative

- Take 5 minutes and write a few 6-word stories about these experiences or patients
Now...Pick ONE of these 6-word stories

- Write a 55-word story about it
- Start by just WRITING
- Now...edit
  - Keep the most important ideas and points
  - Cross out the rest!
  - Remove additional words (a, and, the)
  - Experiment with format – can be anything you want!
Share your stories

- Email them to imwell@medicine.wisc.edu
- Share them with a mentor
- Send them to a medical journal for possible publication!