

Anatomy Lab: It only Takes 10 minutes

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INTRODUCTION

Anatomy Lab is a rite of passage for first years in medical school; it's like our hazing. Everyone must go through it, and everyone must experience the awkward, uncomfortable feelings that inevitably accompany it. It's weird though—people are always talking about lab and prepping us to face our emotions early, reassuring us that it is okay to be upset or walk out if you have to; but, at the same time, no one really wants to talk about it, or think about it at all. No one wanted to make a big deal out of it, but I think that inside we were all at least a little bit worried. I was afraid that I would be an emotional wreck—that I would have to leave because I couldn't handle it. I claimed that I was afraid it would get in the way of my education if I acted like that, but in reality, I was just afraid of being embarrassed. I was scared that it would confirm my doubt that I did not belong in medical school.

ANALYSIS

Like any other person my age, my way of dealing with Anatomy Lab was to just not think about it. When it happens, it happens, and if I didn't think about it maybe I wouldn't get upset. Of course, being a neurotic, I was also concerned that this was my first step in the dreaded direction of becoming a jaded, apathetic physician. But I slowly realized that maybe this was just a very necessary defense mechanism that we use in order to keep a brave face and do what is expected of us in order to best serve our patients.

I still remember the first day of Anatomy Lab. There we were, four extremely confused, unprepared, and shy medical students. None of us wanted to be the first one to open the bag. To this day, I'm not sure how or why, but all of a sudden, I just blurted out "Okay, I'll open it." I unzipped the white body bag, and I still remember continually saying aloud, "Okay, it's okay, don't worry," as if I were reassuring my lab mates. But I knew I was saying it only for myself. I went to pull back the sheet that was covering the body, and I just froze. I yanked my hands back to my body, as if by reflex. It was as if I suddenly became conscious of what I was doing, and I truly did feel afraid. Then we all pulled back the sheet and just tried to take it all in.

The body was face down, and I remember one of my lab mates informing us all that she was a female. It really didn't seem like a dead body at the time, or anytime thereafter. It just seemed lifeless, and that truly made all the difference for me. For example, a cup is not dead, it's just lifeless, and for some reason that's exactly how Ester (what we named our body) seemed to me. Parts of her were squished and deformed, and some parts were even stained odd bright colors. The skin didn't exactly feel like skin; it just felt like really cold, thick, wet leather. Honestly, I really appreciated that—it made it easier for me to take in everything that was happening and be okay with it all. We all just stood there confused, in shock. None of us wanted to make the first cut. Then, a TA came up to our table, and she was so matter

of fact as she explained how to properly skin a body so that most of the fat would come off with the skin and wouldn't have to clean it off the muscles underneath. It sounds gross and extremely disturbing as I type that out now, but at the time it was just...I don't know...work? It was what we were supposed to do, and there was no time to stop and analyze it all. We had to get it started and get it done, and we knew that the longer we stalled, the harder it would be.

My lab mate Emma had made the first cuts, and we were all a bit relieved that she had the courage to do so. Then we just started cutting and peeling as if it were nothing. I still remember my Anatomy professor telling us not to worry about being scared, that "within minutes—I assure you that within 10 minutes," we would be accustomed to it all, and everything would be fine. I couldn't believe that. How are you supposed to cut up a dead body and within minutes be okay? But that's exactly what happened. We were just cutting as if we had done it hundreds of times. Yes, we were confused, and we didn't know what we were looking for, but as soon as we saw that first pink-red color of muscle, all of our fears and anxiety just went out the window. We were so excited, engrossed, and amazed by it all. It was exactly what we had seen in books, but now in real life, and I think that awe is what allowed us to justify what we had just done. Still, I would get mentally freaked out before each "emotionally trying" lab: the day we flipped the body over for the first time; the day we had to take a chisel and hammer to the vertebrae and cut through the spinal cord; the day we skinned the face; the day we sawed the pelvis in half. I remember calling my mom before each one and telling her that I was afraid it would be too much for me. She would tell me not to worry and to think of it like it's my job. But the funny thing is that even though I would get psyched out the night before and was afraid to do what was written in the lab manual, the moment I walked into the lab and started cutting, I was fine. It was over before I could even fathom what had just happened.

It's kind of like when you break up with someone you really loved. When you think ahead to the times you're going to have to spend alone, you absolutely dread it; you ask yourself how you're ever going to get through the day without him or her, how you'll pass the time by yourself. But then you get distracted, or you stop thinking, and before you know it, an hour has passed, or the entire day is done. All of a sudden, you realize that you made it and you're okay, and everything you were dreading never happened. Sure, there are times when you get upset or things catch up to you, but that's one more day you made it by yourself unscathed. For me, that's how those 'trying labs' were: I psyched myself out beforehand and wondered how I would get through them, but then it all turned out okay and I was emotionally intact. As if I had worried for nothing.

Yet when I did get through it, I worried that I might be headed too far in the opposite direction. I didn't want to be completely okay when cutting up a cadaver, not thinking twice about how disturbing it is. I remember a lab in which we had to skin the cadaver's face; I was doing one side and someone else was doing the other. I was just going along my way, humming a song, in fact, and when one of my lab mates came up to me and asked, "Don't you feel sad that you're skinning her face?" I didn't. I didn't feel happy, but I also didn't feel sad or weird. I just felt...nothing. It didn't really faze me, and that scared me when I thought about it later. What type of person had I become? I was able to skin a person's face and be completely okay? I was worried that I had gone too far off the deep end.

I remember talking to one of my mentors about this fear, and he said, "Don't worry. The fact that you're already worried about this shows me that you care enough not to let it happen to you." I hope that's true, but part of me feels as though we have no choice but to say that to ourselves. We can't always worry about the morality of cutting up cadavers without feeling remorse every time we do so; this is our job. If we want to help others, this is something we have to do. No, you should never take pleasure in it, but you can't beat yourself up for finally finding some sort of mental peace that lets you be okay with everything that is happening around you. I hope that if you do dissect a cadaver that you are fascinated and that you do think it's amazing to hold a human heart in your hand. To me, that

only confirms that you are meant for medicine. It is when that fascination exceeds its place that you should become concerned. Still, as they say, admitting you have a problem is the first step toward solving it, so maybe my mentor was right: maybe just being aware of your emotions and being conscious of going too far is the first way to prevent yourself from turning out that way.

CONCLUSION

I find consolation in the fact that I'm a bit nervous about entering the Anatomy Lab again next semester, when I go in to help the first years dissect their bodies. I'm worried that I'll get scared again and freak out about staring death in the face, and that I won't be able to dissect with as much confidence as I did before. Sometimes the bodies don't look as though they're just sleeping peacefully. Some of the faces can be misshapen, as though they're experiencing extreme anguish. It makes me curious about what happened in the few minutes before they passed away: What would make their faces freeze like that? It shocks me that, after a whole semester of dissecting, I can still be nervous and frightened. But I guess that's healthy. I guess that's the one thing that separates me from the jaded and apathetic. Anatomy Lab truly opened my eyes to the truth that medical school is not like anything I have ever done or will ever do. It taught me that it's okay to be scared, worried, or embarrassed. It's a learning experience, and like everything else we will have to do, this is just one of those things that will teach us more about ourselves than perhaps we are willing to learn. Even though your classmates may not admit it, they probably are scared and nervous about lab too. But it will turn out okay, and it will reassure you about your choices in life. It truly is an amazing experience, and if you conquer it with an open mind, you may experience something truly unique.