

The Stethoscope and the Sketchbook: How Creativity Keeps Me Whole

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There is a corner of my room where you will find a constantly revolving collection of watercolors, scraps of collaged paper, pressed flowers, and a journal that captures bits of inspiration. This corner has been one of the most reliable things about the last four years; a place that always has something to offer, no matter what the week brought.

I am a fourth-year osteopathic medical student, and I have been making art for as long as I have been interested in medicine. For a long time, I kept those two parts of myself in separate compartments – science brain over here, creative brain over there.

Medical school has a way of narrowing the aperture, slowly, until diagnoses and treatments are most of what you see. The curriculum is relentless. The emotional weight of patient encounters is real. The question of who you are outside of a white coat becomes harder to answer the longer you wear one.

Art is where I go to remember.

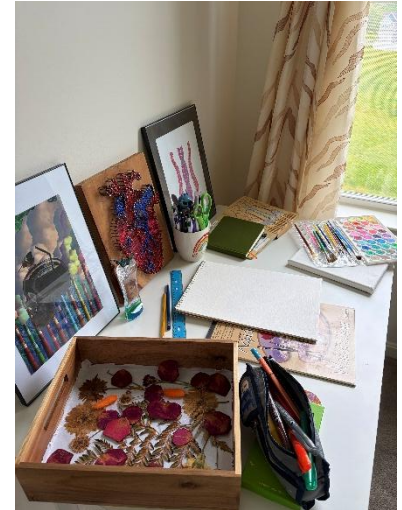
Making Things When Everything Feels Unmakeable

My website, [Dissection of the Self](#), started as a way to archive things I was making in the margins of my training – poetry, digital collages, illustrations that blurred the boundary between the anatomical and the emotional. The title felt honest. Medicine is, in a very literal sense, about learning to take things apart. What I needed was a space to also put things back together.

Over the years, what has surprised me most about my creative practice is how naturally it has pulled me toward sharing it with others. Some of my most meaningful experiences have not been making my own work, but sitting with someone else as they discover what they are capable of making; whether that was facilitating digital collaging workshops through JAYU, or leading the CARE Project with The Grove Youth Wellness Hubs, where we used art as a way into difficult conversations about identity and wellness with youth who did not always have access to those spaces.



There is something quietly radical about handing someone a blank page and watching them fill it. I have also had the gift of being part of larger creative communities – residencies, anthologies, zines, literary magazines – where art, medicine, mental health, and grief all end up in conversation with



each other in ways that clinical training rarely allows. Those spaces reminded me that creativity is not a solitary act. It is one of the most connective things we can do.

What the Research Says – and What I have Lived

Physician burnout is not a personal failing. It is a structural crisis. And while systems-level solutions are urgently needed – and I advocate for them through my work with the ACP – I also believe deeply in the power of individual creative practices.

The evidence is growing: engagement in creative activities is associated with reduced stress, lower rates of burnout, improved empathy, and greater psychological resilience. But I want to speak from experience, not just literature.

When I sit down to make something – whether it is a collage, a watercolor painting, or pencil sketch – something in my nervous system shifts. I am no longer rehearsing diagnoses or worrying about shelf exams. I am present to color, to texture, to the strange joy of making something from nothing. That is rest for a part of the brain that medicine otherwise keeps running at full capacity.



I also write poetry, and I think poetry in particular does something specific for those of us in medicine: it slows language down. We spend so much of our training learning to be efficient with words in our SOAP notes. Poetry insists on the opposite. It asks you to sit with ambiguity, to find the image that holds what a clinical term cannot. That practice of sitting with complexity, rather than resolving it, is actually one of the most valuable skills a physician can have.

You Do Not Have to Be “An Artist”

I want to be clear about something: I am not suggesting you need to have your artwork published in a magazine to benefit from creative practice. The protective power of creativity does not require an audience. It requires only that you make something and that you let it be imperfect.

Sketch the anatomy you are studying, (badly!) and with joy. Write three sentences in a journal before you sleep. Cook something without a recipe. Play an instrument you have been ignoring. The medium matters far less than the act of stepping, even briefly, into a different mode of being.

What I have learned, both personally and through my work in wellness advocacy, is that creative outlets function as a kind of identity anchor. Medicine can be totalizing: it asks a great deal of your time, your emotional energy, and your sense of self. Having a practice that exists outside of it, that belongs to you alone and answers to no grader, no attending, no board; that is what matters.

The Whole Physician

Osteopathic medicine is rooted in a philosophy of treating the whole person. I believe we cannot do that if we are not, ourselves, whole. And wholeness, I have found, requires tending – not just in the grand gestures of self-care we are told to perform, but in the small, consistent act of making something that belongs only to you.

Art has kept me tethered to myself through the hardest stretches of this journey. It has helped me process difficult clinical moments I did not have the clinical language for, grieve losses I did not have formal space to grieve, and stay curious about the world beyond pathology. On the days when medicine has felt like it was asking everything of me, creativity has been the thing that gave something back.

I do not think this is incidental. I think it is part of what makes a good physician. The capacity for presence, for sitting with uncertainty, for seeing the person behind the diagnosis. These are not skills you develop only in clinical rotations. They grow in the quiet work of paying attention to the world and finding ways to express what you find there. Art trains that muscle. So does poetry, and cooking, and music, and whatever it is that makes you lose track of time in the best possible way.

So, if you have let that practice go – quietly, gradually, because there was always another exam and never enough hours – I would gently encourage you to pick it back up.

The stethoscope and the sketchbook: both belong in your bag.

