

## BOOK REVIEWS

*One Breath Apart: Facing Dissection*, by Sandra L. Bertman, Amityville, NY: Baywood, 2009. 96 pp., paper, \$28.95.

In this evocative book, Sandra Bertman takes the reader on an intimate journey. Comprised of a compilation of quotes, images, and poetry, *One Breath Apart: Facing Dissection* chronicles the experiences of first-year medical students and their reactions to their cadaver “partners.” Interspersed among the many compelling graphics and verses, the reader is accompanied by Bertman through the first year of Gross Anatomy, as she lucidly explains the chronology of events that will unfold.

To capture authentic responses, Bertman and her colleagues incorporate a masterful teaching strategy by providing students with the opportunity to express themselves as they explore their attitudes toward their cadavers and the dissection process. Students are provided with a blank template upon which they are invited to share their thoughts and feelings through words or art. The depth and range of sentiments depicted reveal raw, honest emotions which underscore the cathartic effect of this activity.

The array of responses, many of which are mediated by beliefs and family or cultural values, are poignant and insightful, yet in spite of these varied reactions a common theme emerges—one of gratitude and respect. This is evidenced at the memorial service that is conducted at the end of the academic year whereby the students pay tribute to their cadaver “teachers.” Donor family members are invited to the service and the students have the opportunity to talk to them about the lives of the donors who, in death, taught them so much about life.

*One Breath Apart: Facing Dissection* would be a refreshing supplemental companion to a clinical gross anatomy text. Although the target market for this book is predominantly medical, nursing, and dental students, I believe its appeal extends beyond that. Forensic and mortuary sciences programs, EMT and paramedic training, and upper level anatomy and physiology courses are but some examples. Certainly those studying or currently working in the ever-growing field of thanatology would find *One Breath Apart: Facing Dissection* to be a most insightful and welcomed addition to their resource library.

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# ONE BREATH APART

## FACING DISSECTION

**Sandra L. Bertman**

"One is never the same after Gross Anatomy class. Sandra Bertman's *One Breath Apart* is a collective diary of the medical profession's time-honored right-of-passage and a tribute to one of the sacred privileges accorded physicians-in-training. This delightful book is at turns poignant, profound, earnest, and awkward, just like the first year medical students, who are its subjects and contributing authors."

—*Ira Byock, M.D.*

Professor, Dartmouth Medical School  
Author, *Dying Well* and *The Four Things That Matter Most*

What started in the mid-seventies as brown-bag lunchtime optional seminars for students, faculty, and staff of the (then) University of Massachusetts Medical Center evolved into a magnificent project. The medical students' courageous willingness to acknowledge their feelings about death and dissection has made this book possible.

It is our hope that this slim volume—this collection of words and images created by the medical students at University of Massachusetts during the last thirty years (and augmented by Meryl Levin's documentary photographs of students from Weill Medical College of Cornell University and their journal entries written in 1998 and published in *Anatomy of Anatomy*)—will provide you with what good doctors provide for their patients: catharsis, personal insights, and support.

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