

Vitae:

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UNMENTIONABLE, IMMEASURABLE 4

What's new? The name of our magazine,
the tools engineered in-house for faculty surgeons (*page 10*),
a special alumni section (*beginning on page 21*), and more!

Unment

Medical humanities and the arts shape one professor's insight into death and dying throughout history and across cultures.

Sandra Bertman, PhD, is a collector of, among other things, epitaphs — the always brief, often moving, sometimes pithy, inscriptions on gravestones. Other pieces in her collection include slides of paintings and sculptures, photographs, greeting cards, cartoons, video clips from 30 years of television drama and comedy, books of poetry and plays, novels and essays, student drawings and writings, and more.

Dr. Bertman uses all these visual and literary images as catalysts to help future and practicing health care providers explore human

suffering, loss, dying and death — what she calls “the unmentionables and immeasurables” of medicine — for their patients and themselves. Long recognized as a pioneer in the modern field of thanatology — the psychology of death, dying and grief counseling — Bertman is professor of medical humanities in the Department of Medicine and director of UMMS’ program, Medical Humanities and the Arts in Health Care.

From offering elective and “brown bag” seminars, to becoming the founding director of UMMS’ original Program in Medical

Humanities in 1979, her work as a death educator has continued to evolve. She has taught in the School of Medicine and Graduate School of Nursing since the mid-1970s, and is also a faculty member for the New England AIDS Education and Training Center.

Bertman is author of numerous publications, including her acclaimed book, *Facing Death: Images, Insights and Interventions, a Handbook for Educators, Health Care Professionals and Counselors*. For her counseling and group work with patients, she received the all-campus

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Distinguished Professional Public Service Award marking the University of Massachusetts' 125th anniversary. She also played a key role in establishing the Palliative Care Service, originally at UMass Medical Center and now run by the Visiting Nurse Association.

Bertman tirelessly advocates for a human-centered model of care for the dying that is based on the precepts of hospice and palliative care, including therapies that treat the emotional, existential and spiritual aspects of health within mainstream medicine. She believes ongoing nourishment to the clinician's own psyche is

necessary, if one is to provide optimum care while practicing the art as well as the science of medicine. "Nurses and physicians, caretakers of every kind, are dealing with multiple death, losing people they care about all the time," she says. "I was very interested in how physicians' and nurses' own attitudes toward death influenced their interactions with patients."

She found a natural ally in Sandy Marks, DDS, PhD, professor of cell biology and radiology, who also felt strongly that first-year medical students should have support for the dissection experience. Their collaboration

resulted in the course "On Death, Dying and Dissection." Other courses she has created include "Far Worse than the Tumor: Coping with Cancer," "The Language of Grief and the Art of Consolation," "The Handling of Bad News: An Ongoing Dialogue," "The Agonies and Ecstasies of Aging," "Children, Families, and Death," and "The Changing Images of AIDS."

A former dancer and choreographer, Bertman is a lifelong lover of the arts who has drawn upon these worlds in all her professional endeavors. After graduating with a bachelor's in English, she began teaching the



subject in high school. She quickly discovered her love of teaching and went on to earn her master's in education. Later, as she integrated her work as a teacher and thanatologist, Bertman became a licensed social worker and earned a PhD in medical humanities.

Just as she had turned to the visual, dramatic, musical and cinematic arts to teach English, she drew heavily on fiction, narrative and poetry to form a syllabus for her first thanatology course, "Perspectives on Death and Dying." Offered through the Cambridge Center for Adult Education, this course was the first of its kind in the Boston area.

Championing the role of right-brained ways of knowing in scientific mainstream medicine, she believes that the skills involved in therapeutic and aesthetic competency are one and the same: perceptiveness, discrimination, tolerance, empathy and self-awareness. Indeed, balancing intellect with intuition, synthesis with analysis, "is critical thinking and anything but 'new age,'" according to Bertman.

Sandra Bertman, PhD, professor of medical humanities and director of UMMS' program, Medical Humanities and the Arts in Health Care.



*Compassion (1894), Edvard Munch. Drypoint and aquatint, 210 x 213 mm. Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, Norway. Photograph by Jacques Lathion, Nasjonalgalleriet. (This image from Dr. Bertman's 1991 book, **Facing Death: Images, Insights, and Interventions**, is reproduced with permission.)*

“Since grief is not a cerebral problem but a subjective experience, we understand grief only and entirely as we filter and interpret it through our own experience. Initially it captures us, but we can capture it back and reshape it; and the expressive arts and therapies function beautifully as vehicles to help us reshape grief.” From Sandra L. Bertman's introduction to her latest book, *Grief and The Healing Arts: Creativity As Therapy*

“The experience and events of illness are not black and white. Suffering cannot be resolved with simple answers, platitudes and narrowly applied skills. The paradox of self-knowledge is our capacity to find ourselves by losing ourselves; art encounters are the best way I know to disentangle ourselves from the rote, routine ways of seeing and acting.”

Naturally gifted in the language of art, Bertman has committed herself to demonstrating the way aesthetic, narrative and spiritual competencies can be used to refresh the clinicians' own souls. “I feel strongly that you don't have to be a literary critic or an art historian to interact with a work of art. Being willing to engage is the only prerequisite.”

Discovering the possibilities in caring, and the ways the arts inform our understanding and behaviors, continues to be a joyous challenge for Sandra Bertman. For more than 30 years, she has used her gifts as a teacher and her passion for the arts to help people cope with even the

worst-case scenarios of chronic and terminal illness, aging, disability and death.

Her latest book, *Grief and the Healing Arts: Creativity as Therapy*, is an anthology of stories, expressive therapies and essays, including “On the Nature of Suffering” by UMMS Chancellor/Dean Aaron Lazare, MD. The book's purpose is the same as her own, as she writes in its introduction, “to refuel therapists, counselors, social workers, physicians, nurses, clergy and all others who are committed to providing support to those in grief.”

Bertman is “interested in self-discovery for medical and nursing students. It's important for them to integrate all the wonderful science they're learning with their humanity, and it's a joy to see them respond — I've been very lucky,” she says with a smile. — S L G