

Physician's Exasperation

Category: Poems

written by Howard Stein | August 15, 2008

Howard F. Stein

We know so much about you—
Your blood, your urine, your internal organs.
We can see everything.
There is precious little that
Is not wrong with you medically.
Still, you do not listen to us.
You miss appointments;
You don't go to referrals we've made.
Do you defy us or merely not understand
How dire your condition is?
You could die at any time,
We have told you more than once.
Still, you muddle along as if all we know
Does not matter. Tell me, what
Is missing from our story?
Have we failed to impress upon you
The urgency of the hour? Speak to me.
I will listen now.

About the poet:

Howard Stein PhD, a psychoanalytic and medical anthropologist, is a professor in the Department of Family and Preventive Medicine at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City, where he has taught for thirty years. A poet as well as a researcher and scholar, he has published five books of poetry, including *Theme and Variations*, which will be published this October by Finishing Line Press (www.finishinglinepress.com). In 2006 he was nominated for Oklahoma Poet Laureate.

About the poem:

"The search for control—real, imagined, wished-for—is at the unstated core of much of medical 'competence.' Not only are diseases often "out of control," but patients are likewise beyond physicians' control. In the face of repeated struggles to gain patient 'compliance' or 'adherence' to medical advice, and after engaging in "patient education" for the umpteenth time, physicians wonder how they can possibly help the patient. Sometimes, a moment of grace arrives: the physician relinquishes the quest for control and enlists the patient's help in the form of storytelling. 'What is your story, your experience, from which I can learn how to help you?' the physician asks in many different ways. Sometimes a remedy for physician exasperation is deep, attentive listening."