

Hello, everyone. My name is Mariam Mansour, and I am a second year medical student here at the University of Iowa. I am honored to have this opportunity to voice some of my thoughts and reflections with you all today.

I would like to begin by confessing that I am a bit of an anatomy enthusiast. In fact, at any mention of the brachial plexus (a tangle of nerves that exists near the armpit), I have heard that my friends instantaneously think of me. Not a picture or a schematic. Not our professors. Me. Flattering or worrisome? You decide. The reason I mention my love of anatomy is because unlike many of my peers, my anatomy lab experience here was not my first.

My first cadaver dissection experience was during my senior year of high school, which, looking back, is actually really astonishing. The Honors Anatomy class took a four-day trip to my teacher's alma mater, where we had the opportunity to dissect a certain region in groups. Can you guess what region my group dissected? It was the brachial plexus.

Leading up to entering the lab, I was a jittery mess of nerves. I wasn't as scared of what I would see and encounter as I was of how I would react. I reflected on this entire experience at length during my undergraduate years, including the moment when I met the donors. Here is a snippet from a memoir I wrote about it:

“I stood there motionless, in that sacred moment. None of us spoke. None of us moved. None of us dared disturb the quiet tranquility that held us unlike any other.

I recall some details about the two donors I was introduced to that night. I will mention that they were both women, and that looking upon them, I felt none of the fear or dread or unease I had been expecting to wash over me. None. I was surprised to find that it was an immense

wave of gratitude that floored me instead. These two women had put enough value in education, enough value in teaching the next generation of surgeons and doctors and nurses and physical therapists and every healthcare professional imaginable, that they had given themselves for the sake of their faith in these generations to come. I basked in the selflessness of their sacrificial act, unable to express my gratitude even in my thoughts.”

The vast majority of those few days have faded away into a flurry of memories with more gaps than substance. I do remember, however, a moment which I have never recounted aloud. That night I laid awake on my less-than-comfortable cot, the sleeping breaths of my friends barely audible through the dorm room we were sharing. It was only in that still silence that I happened upon the space to finally reflect alone. And to my surprise, I found words of prayer overflowing, although that had not been my intention. Prayers of gratitude. Prayers for those who had bestowed upon us this gift which I could barely fathom. Prayers for their families and loved ones. Prayers for us, as students, to honor this gift and carry it with us forever. They kept coming, one after another. And I would be lying if I said no tears escaped me that night.

The reason I bring this — my very first cadaver experience — forward is because I believe that it set the foundation for every other similar experience I have had since, including that of this past year.

Every donor I have encountered has left a mark on me. Each one has taught me humility through their inexplicable and selfless gift. I still grapple with fully wrapping my mind around it - what it takes to make this decision and what it reflects about the individual who makes it. Their love of knowledge and learning. Their desire to teach in a way no teacher ever can. Their belief

in us, the healthcare professionals of the generation to come. I may not have known any of these donors, but I can't help but feel that I do know them, just a little.

Each one has reminded me to retain my humanity. In this busy field my peers and I are entering, it is far too easy to be swept up in the whirlwind of the day to day. But life is meaningless if we do not take time to remember why we live it. These donors have prompted me to dig deep into my person and recall who I really am at my center. Those prayers that filled me on that chilly January night years ago came from my core. Whenever I reflect on my experiences in the anatomy lab, I always dig up pearls of truth about what I believe and how that influences my future as a physician.

Each one has taught me that the medicine we learn in the classroom — be it anatomy or mechanisms of health and disease — is only part of the picture. It is common to wonder about the details of the life of your donor — where they grew up, what they saw and experienced, the people who shaped their lives, whether they would have liked the newest Netflix fad show. I find it intriguing that the tiny details we so desire about these, our first patients, are oftentimes ruled as unnecessary to the practice of medicine. But that human aspect - the ability to form a meaningful connection with those you interact with - is everything. The little details set us apart, they are ultimately the stories we tell.

And this is a story that I am always more than honored to tell. The story where the dead teach the living so much more than just anatomy. They teach us everything that matters.