Protect Yourself From This
By Karen Fiser

Protect yourself from this, the sight
of the lumpish woman in plate glass
laboring to push herself along
in her coat, in the sun.
She looks to be a woman of a certain age,
a nice woman, but forlorn, with too much pain
in her face to be outdoors. You look away,
then swiftly back, to see her struggle with the chair
outside the heavy bank door, holding her packages upright
in her lap with her teeth.
She starts to mutter, how difficult
things are. For an instant you allow yourself to feel
her dread, her effort not to become
another crazy crying on a Berkeley street.
She is not what you feel yourself to be,
but what you see you are,
reflected in the world’s unyielding surfaces.
You know you can never leave her, now.

One of the central issues in medical education is how to respond to the suffering of others. Idealistic medical students think they will always respond with an altruistic approach impulse, in which they will naturally draw closer to the suffering other, feel empathy toward this other, and be moved to put the interests of the other above their own interests. Yet they may find that, more often than not, they exhibit an opposite, but equally strong, impulse to detach and separate from the contamination of others’ suffering. Although this can be fear of literal contamination, it is more likely to be a desire to create emotional distance from the metaphorical contamination embodied in patients’ inevitable vulnerability, helplessness, and loss of control. Yet pushing the patient away runs the risk of turning the patient into an object and justifies negative judgments, frustration, anger, and blame directed toward the patient. Although any patient can trigger the withdrawal response, patients who suffer from stigmatized conditions such as obesity, substance abuse, or other perceived “lifestyle choices,” and patients who are perceived as “different” from the student, physically, mentally, culturally, or socioeconomically, are particularly vulnerable to the phenomenon of pulling back. The withdrawal impulse is rooted in psychodynamic phenomena of splitting and scapegoating, in which the withdrawing individual or group is protected from the perceived threat of difference by projecting all feared negative qualities onto the rejected other. Once we locate our own dissolution and vulnerability externally, our anxiety is ameliorated and becomes more manageable. Unfortunately, however, although we may feel better, the patient often feels worse—isolated, alienated, and demeaned.

Karen Fiser, a poet trained as a philosopher, and also someone with personal experience of pain and disability, explores these issues in her poem, “Protect yourself.” She addresses herself to the presumably nondisabled Everyperson, her face. Once this recognition occurs, once this connection is made, however accidentally or unwillingly, we are irrevocably linked: “You can never leave her now.” Paradoxically, through our gaze, the ability to “leave,” what is sometimes more technically referred to as emotional abandonment of the patient, has become impossible—and the first steps toward an authentically altruistic response, grounded in acknowledgment of the similarities underlying perceived difference, have been taken.

Fiser’s poem makes vivid for students—and the rest of us—the choices we make, often unconscious, but choices nonetheless, about how we position ourselves in relation to others. The poem also enables rigorous exploration of the philosophical premises underlying the impulses to draw nearer versus to pull away. Philosophers such as Julia Kristeva have theorized in detail the modernist view of the pure, clean, stable, and invulnerable body that must be protected through rigid differentiating boundaries against contamination from everything in the world that threatens this idealized self. The psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has extensively analyzed the I/Other split, which leads us to differentiate and oppose ourselves to the other as a form of personal safeguarding.

On the other hand, feminist scholars such as Margrit Shildrick argue that it is only by facing our imperfection, vulnerability, and fragility that we can lose our fear, and only by softening our boundaries that we will find the courage to embrace the damaged other—and our damaged selves. Engaging students in interrogating the implications of Fiser’s poem allows us to reflect on these issues and decide on our moral relationship with the suffering other, whether through doctoring or simply through being.

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References