I stand before a petite, beautiful woman with arms casually posed in front of her, almost directing my attention to her abdomen, which reveals her inner organs exquisitely dissected. I am in awe, seeing myself in her. Without skin, we look very much alike, yet our individuality lingers in the shape of our muscles and in the health of our organs. She is dead and plastinated—plastic polymers preserving her as the work of art she has always been and continues to be.

A woman behind me asks, “Where is the uterus?” I point to a small delicate structure lying neatly above the bladder. “And the ovaries?” I point to them sitting on top of the Fallopian tubes gracefully hugging the curve of the pelvic wall. “Here are the tubes and the ovaries.” She says, “They are so beautiful.” My eyes mist. This is the first time she has seen these amazing female organs. I have felt them for years in the countless gynecological examinations I have performed in over 20 years. And yet, I am seeing them again for the first time.

Most of the people viewing this exhibit, Body Worlds: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies, have never seen an anatomical dissection. Doctors are among the few in society privileged to have a cadaver to teach them the secrets of the body. Despite my experiences as a medical student, these dissections capture my attention and amazement in a way I have never experienced before, even in years of viewing and doing surgery myself. Gunten van Hagen and his team used a revolutionary process of preserving body structures that capture function and structure together through “expanding dissection.” This process creates a unique, vividly colored, three-dimensional anatomical specimen. The circulatory system looks like an intricate coral reef. Many of the specimens are displayed and labeled in a traditional manner. What makes this exhibit so fascinating are the posed bodies. A dramatic energy remains in the dancer leaping in the air and in the archer who is ready to send an arrow to her target. Separation between life and death blur, and we are left with the energy that inhabited this person that persists beyond death. A teacher is poised with chalk in one hand, anatomy booklet in the other, excitedly writing something on the board for us.

From the Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin.
to learn. A body builder at the peak of his physical development has another body behind him with a hand on his shoulder. We are reminded that death is always with us, walking not far behind us.

A friend, who is a psychotherapist, accompanies me to the exhibit at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, where the exhibit will continue through September 2005 and then travel to Pittsburgh. Both she and I have recently injured our knees, and we examine the knees of many of the posed exhibits fascinated with our own anatomy. In our death-denying culture, I was surprised to see this level of interest among average, nonmedical people. It is a warm, sunny day in Chicago, yet hundreds of people line up patiently to view the exhibit. The posed specimen of a basketball player ready to take a shot—minus his skin—doesn't seem to deter the faint of heart. Inside the exhibit, most people are quiet in fascination. My friend, who has never seen a dissection, is amazed by the beauty, complexity and detail of the human body. It reminds her of the finality of death, and after an hour in the exhibit, she is saturated with its effect and needs to leave.

One medical student enjoys sharing her knowledge of body structures with her family and friends. My friend remarks that not having the personal stories of the posed people allows the audience to see this exhibit in a “bigger picture” form rather than as individual curiosities. In the exhibit comment book, children remarked that the exhibit was “really cool” but also “nasty,” “neat,” and “gross.” Paradox is inherent in life and death. This is an exhibit that will affect you deeply. I encourage all health care professionals, especially physicians, to consider it the ultimate continuing medical education and a marvelous review of anatomy. Our anatomy connects us all. We all die. Differences among us are in the end inconsequential. Our care of the human body is emphasized. We are truly a work of art and science. Amazing.

For more information on this exhibit, see www.koerperwelten.de/en/pages/ausstellungsziel.asp. See the Web site of Body Worlds for more information on where the exhibit will be in the future and specific information on the technique of plastination and expanded dissection.

Correspondence: Address correspondence to Dr Marchand, University of Wisconsin, Department of Family Medicine, 777 South Mills Street, Madison, WI 53715-1896. 608-376-7819. Fax: 608-263-5813. lucille.marchand@fammed.wisc.edu.

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