



## **55-Word Stories:** **A Collection From the 32nd Forum for Behavioral Science in Family Medicine**

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(Fam Med 2013;45(9):656-7.)

**F**ifty-five word stories are brief pieces of creative writing that are increasingly being used in health care training settings.<sup>1-3</sup> The brevity of the form allows nearly everyone to express an important experience or idea.

In September 2011, the first author presented a seminar on 55-word stories at the 32nd Forum for Behavioral Science in Family Medicine, a Society of Teachers of Family Medicine endorsed, Medical College of Wisconsin-sponsored meeting dedicated to presenting and improving methods of integrating behavioral science teaching into family medicine training. Attendees at this conference are mostly behavioral scientists; approximately 20% of the attendees are physicians. This session was one of two sessions at the conference dedicated to creative reflective writing in medical education.

Using a similar workshop format reported elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> I introduced the technique and invited participants to read aloud several stories written by former residents, fellows, and faculty published in our medical center periodical.<sup>5</sup> We ask the reader to read each story through twice to allow the impact of the story to come through to the listeners. After participants read the example stories aloud, I discussed the 55-word story technique<sup>4</sup> and provided the opportunity for participants to write their own stories. I invited the group to jot down some ideas based on their work as faculty and then to try and flesh out one into a 55-word story. In teaching this, I suggest, but don't mandate, strict adherence to the form. Participants are invited to share their stories aloud and reflect on the process of writing a brief story in a group setting.

Many participants shared stories about challenges relating to the role of educator, parent, physician, and behavioral scientist/family systems faculty in a new setting. During the course of participants reading their stories aloud, others in the session empathized or provided helpful comments. I offer here a collection of stories generated from the seminar, with permission of the

participants/authors, together with their comments on the experience of writing these brief pieces.

### **Patient Teacher**

Oh no, again?

A big lump: non-compliant, depressed; in the hospital  
Oh no, again.

Who are you?

Lonely, poor, trapped in your body, in your pain.

Every month I listen, you smile.

Three years you come, never to the hospital.

I am away when you do.

Oh no, again,

and bleed,

and die,

without me.

*Katherine Neely, MD*

*Writing always intimidates me. There is something about sitting in a group, with blank paper in front of me, which allows me to wait long enough for the story that needed to come to do so. But as I wrote I realized that not being able to say good-bye to this patient from 15 years ago had always haunted me. Writing this allowed me to say goodbye and to thank her for what I had learned.*

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## Grief, Growth, and Ganja

“I know what I’m smelling, and it’s NOT incense.”  
 He denies it.  
 Of course he does.  
 F---.  
 Sniff the air, walk around the basement. Now what?  
 “Remain an ask-able parent,” I remember.  
 My wife calls 2 days later. Walking the dogs, he told her everything.  
 Courage is overcoming the paralysis of fear. Have faith.

*A family physician who prefers anonymity*

*I was grieving, having just learned about my son’s marijuana use the night before I left town for the Behavioral Science Forum. Writing was cathartic; it connected the right and left sides of my brain in community, bringing meaning to my grief. After reading my story aloud, at least two participants tended caringly to me.*

## OSCE

I, Behaviorist, observe interns during orientation.  
 Volunteer simulates “anxious patient.”  
 I temper but also supplement her frank feedback.  
 Interns shaken;  
 I regret my contribution  
 Still driven to demonstrate my value in medical world.  
 I realize: They too may struggle with insecurity, ego, mistakes.  
 So I share what happened, apologize. They forgive; maybe learn, too.

*Gerald W. Greenfield, PhD*

*I was moved to write this story by the satisfaction I felt in turning the lemons of a personal/professional mistake into the lemonade of apology, candid sharing, and the hope that the interns ended up learning from our shared experience.*

## A Duck Among Geese

A gaggle of geese fill the yard,  
 Chattering together  
 and I, the only duck.  
 They honk, I quack  
 and somehow we understand.

We learn from each other.  
 We share the same goals.

I think I’m going to like this yard.  
 It’s good to be a duck among geese.

Progress!  
 Last year I was a fish.

*Christine B. Bogar, PhD, LPC*

*As a new behavioral medicine faculty member after a long career as a mental health counselor, I felt as though I landed on another planet. As I pondered my experience, what flowed from my pen helped me laugh about my new journey and affirm that I had indeed made some progress. But the best result of all occurred when my fellow “ducks” laughed along with me because they too had “waddled” along similar paths.*

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