Using the 55-Word Story Method of Reflection and Writing About Not Losing Hope in Humanity

Pearl Huynh MS, Ricardo Falcon MD, Tim Petersen PhD, Codruta Soneru MD, University of New Mexico

Introduction

The 55-word story creative writing method uses elements of poetry, prose, or both to encapsulate key health care experiences. It stimulates personal reflection on important experiences, and it can be a tool for practitioners’ professional growth. Writers and readers of the stories gain insight into weighty emotional or professional moments; the pieces’ brevity adds impact. In health care, we are expected to come to work, do our job, care for others, and leave our emotions and fears at the door of the hospital. But people working in hospitals are not immune to the health threats and emotional strain in their day-to-day life. Having 55-word stories in an education portfolio can help learners process meaningful experiences and help with personal and professional growth.

How to write a 55-word story (3)

1. Think of a compelling story based on your experience (as a clinician, patient, other)
2. Write down everything you can think of
3. Don’t edit, just write (phrases, words, key chunks of memory)
4. Put it away (optional and can be done at any time between #2 and finishing)
5. Read over your writing and begin to clarify the idea or storyline that you want to convey
6. Begin editing, sometimes ruthlessly
7. Share your work with others for reactions and feedback
8. Keep editing until you get to 55 words. Use your word counter, and also double check manually: A. Title doesn’t contribute to the word count but shouldn’t be more than seven words. B. Contractions count as single words. C. Eliminating articles (the, a, an) can help with word count
9. If you cannot cut enough words, you probably have material that either would lend itself to a longer essay or become multiple 55-word stories
10. Given the brevity, formatting can make a big difference. Experiment with line length, indentations, hanging indents, and other use of white space

Draft 1:

I have so many mixed feelings about everything going on in the world right now. There is so much disagreement on everything and to me it feels like we can never get everyone on the same page. Whether it be political things, health care, Roe v. Wade, world hunger, vaccines, violence, etc. Being a first-year medical student, it can be easy to forget about everything going on in the world as you are so busy trying to study and stay afloat. I forget about everything going wrong for a while until I open a news article or Facebook and see another school shooting happening not too long from the last one that occurred. My hope in humanity had been continuing to decrease as I continued seeing all the bad news. As I continued forgetting away in my studies, I completely forgot that I needed to make an appointment for my dad to see his surgeon regarding a procedure he had awhile back on his arm -- I felt extremely guilty that I didn’t find time to make it for him. A week later, I had dinner with him and asked how his doctor’s appointment went (this was with his oncologist who knows nothing about his surgical procedure), he told me it went well and that the doctor went out of her way to ask about his arm and even asked to call and make his appointment for him. Him telling me this made me cry. It was so touching to me that his oncologist went out of her way to make his appointment for him when it had nothing to do with her care. Amid all this chaos, my dad, who does not speak English, received help. I thought to myself, maybe hope in humanity still exists.

Draft 2:

It seems like it is impossible to get everyone on the same page these days. Politics, healthcare, abortion, violence, hunger, and so many more. It can be easy to temporarily forget everything as I am buried deep into my textbooks, but I get reminders when I open newspapers and social media to remind me of my hope in humanity inching away day by day. An encounter with my dad occurred. My hope for humanity diminishes. One day, an oncologist made an appointment for my dad through his cellphone about his missed orthopedic appointment. My mind changed. She didn’t need to do that. I thought to myself, maybe hope in humanity still exists.

Discussion

Verbalizing strong feelings was hard. I adore my parents, who left wartime Vietnam seeking a better life and future. I feel guilty about spending little time with them, and not always helping my non-English-speaking dad with appointments. We live in stressful, conflicting times. My story helped pinpoint the essence; cutting to 55 words was cathartic. Reflecting on the good instead of focusing on the negative is okay.

References