

## EDITORIAL

# Commentary on *Global Health in Malawi: A Collection of Poems*, by Zachary G. Jacobs, M.D.



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*Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.*

—Robert Frost

*Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.*

—William Wordsworth

It is just one planet in a galaxy in the universe, but for us who live on the earth, it is a universe unto itself. Global health enables physicians and other health professionals to be in that world courtesy of the opportunities afforded by our privileged professions. In this issue, Dr. Jacobs' collection of poems about his experience working in Malawi, Africa, as an internal medicine resident in the Global Health and Underserved Populations track at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center provides a peek into the experience of practicing global health.

Writing about poetry is an inevitably prosaic enterprise, but Dr. Jacobs' precocious poetry deserves more attention than a once-through. First, it sears with the heat of what practicing global health is like and serves as an efficient immersion into the experience for newcomers to the field. There is no poetic license here. Global health can be as hard on the senses as the bright sunlight of his "Tenacity" and the stomach-turning smells of "On the Wards." For some reason, so much of global health as we know it takes place in warm climates, and the heat always seems to greet those of us arriving from more moderate climes with a foreboding weight of things to come.

Global health is heavy, and anyone contemplating giving it a try ought to let the emotions of Dr. Jacobs' poems wash over them before leaping in. Feel the devotion, the intimacy, and the ambition but also

the intimidation, the revulsion, and the impotency. No one travels to places in need without *knowing* these things, but *feeling* them in advance is different and may help inoculate and even self-select.

Dr. Jacobs' poems exemplify how poetry and personal writing can help not only with preparation but also with personal and professional reflection. We encourage all travelers in our global mental health program to journal while they are away, both to inform future travelers and organizational planning and to help lend shape, meaning, and memory to the massive experience that is any global health trip. We do not typically suggest the vehicle of poetry, but Dr. Jacobs' poems remind us that any reflective writing, and maybe poetry in particular, can help frame what would otherwise be unframeable.

It can be taxing to write at the end of a long day's work from a faraway bed, but it is worth the effort. I do not know when Dr. Jacobs wrote these poems, but "From Tempest, Tranquility" underscores Wordsworth's depiction of the platform that tranquility provides for processing emotional experiences. I dutifully put in my late nights of writing while abroad but find my long flight back typically provides the most powerful tranquility for me, and it is imperative for every global health professional to find moments of tranquility before arriving home from abroad.

It is so very important to both anticipate and to reflect on global health trips because they happen on 2 channels—personal and professional. They involve a level of commitment that amounts to a house call where the doctor opts to live with his or her patient for a while, possibly in one of those cookie-drop huts that Dr. Jacobs conjures up in "Sunshine." It is a house call where the "patient" is really a whole community or even a country, because we are typically trying

to do more than treat individual patients by making a public health impact. In global health, we lend all of ourselves to the effort in ways atypical of our usual medical practice, and we help get ourselves back when we write or find other avenues to reflect and metabolize the experience.

When a premedical student and I were in a car en route to the airport at the end of a global health

trip to Belize, she asked what I have wondered about, on some level, so many times but without her precision—"How can I possibly explain this trip to anybody?" Dr. Jacobs has exemplified one way. Whether we possess his gift and patience for writing, it is probably the effort in trying, more than the eloquence of it all, that matters in explaining it to ourselves.