



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

THE PERSPECTIVE OF TWO PAINTINGS BY A PATIENT-PHYSICIAN

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As physicians, we come to know daily accounts of pain and suffering experienced by our patients, but it is not easy for us to truly understand their plight, and to fully comprehend how their illness can negatively impact every aspect of their lives. However, since we as physicians are not personally immune from illness faced by our patients, we do face circumstances whereby we as patients experience the true plight of our patients.

I myself have suffered from ankylosing spondylitis (AS), a chronic, potentially disabling rheumatic disease, for more than 48 years of my life [1].

Not surprisingly, my primary research interests have included AS and related diseases (spondyloarthropathies) [2]. As a physician for almost 40 years, and as an academic rheumatologist, I have faced the daily challenges of living with AS, and my professional responsibilities and passions. It is from this perspective that I convey my feelings through my two paintings that are the focus of this paper.

I was led into painting my first picture by default. A friend of mine offered to paint for me in color a picture of my beloved mother after she had passed away from cancer. I gave him a copy of my mother's last portrait. When more than a year went by and my friend kept saying that he was working on it and each time wanting a little more time, I went to see him to find out the status of the promised work. He had drawn some general outline and colored the background of the canvas. I told him to forget about what he had promised to do, and that I will finish what he had started to do, although I had never painted in color, and had no formal training. So I brought the canvas home, bought acrylic paint, and over the next few weeks finished the painting. I did not



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sign or date the painting because it was not completely my work alone.

The focus of this painting is the presence of pain of terminal cancer as conveyed by the eyes, and not masked by an attempt to smile at the request of the photographer. I was there when she had this picture taken. The white of her eyes was already revealing a very faint yellow color as a result of her liver metastasis. She would bear the pain and refuse to take narcotics because she did not want her sharp mind to be clouded and dulled. She did not want her two grandchildren to feel as if she is unwell

or too sleepy to talk to them or to play with them. In the painting please note the absence of the glare of the lenses of her eyeglasses in order to make the frame of those eyeglasses bring focus on those eyes. Her scarf covers the alopecia that had resulted from the chemotherapy.

It so happened that a year later my friend delivered at my home the framed portrait of my mother that hangs in my house. But it is an exact replica of what the camera saw when it took the picture, but what I have tried to convey in the painting of my beloved mother are the subtleties that only I would have known. After all I am the first of her five children, two of them physicians, and had the honor to take care of her in her waning years.

The second painting is my own self-portrait [3]. I painted it in acrylic in 1987; it took me 6 months to first conceptualize it in my mind and 6 weeks to finish it. It is not easy to fully explain all that goes into forming such an artwork. Just to explain to the viewer its major aspects in simplest terms, this painting can be subdivided into three vertical components or columns. These columns convey different themes, each utilizing my middle name ASIM (which is my given name) written in Latin or

Arabic scripts, the two most widely used alphabetic writing systems in the world.

The first two letters “A” and “S” in the column on the left represent Ankylosing Spondylitis, the illness I have suffered from since age 12, and the four letters together convey “AS I M”, i.e., ‘AS I am’. The red color in the background of AS indicates the inflammatory nature of this disease, and the letter “S” is showing the spinal curvature and fusion. The inflammatory nature is also conveyed by the letter “i” and its background, while the letter “M” with its green background indicates that I am proud to be a Muslim. The letters “I” and “M”, and the abbreviated version of the United States flag, indicate my immigration to the US; I did not have time, as a busy physician, to make 50 stars and 13 stripes.

The middle column utilizes these four letters in lower-case (asim) to create my profile in such a way as to convey agility and vitality. The heart in the fused thoracic cage is drawn in a transparent manner to indicate my straightforward nature. The first letter “a” forms a sort of an enclosure or a halo encircling as well as forming my head and face. My nose and ear are drawn realistically, and my moustache and balding head had no gray hair in 1987. The circle at the site of the eye conveys my recurrent bout of acute iritis, and the eye is transposed to the side of the head to convey my inability to turn my neck since a laterally placed eye would have compensated for the limited field of vision. The next letter “s” forms the spine with its syndesmophytes (bony bridges), while “i” provides lumbar spinal junction with the letter “m” that forms the pelvis and bilateral hip arthroplasties.

The vertical column on the right side consists of the four Arabic letters called ‘ayin, alif, suad and meem that comprise my middle name- Asim. These letters are written from above down in solitary (non-cursive) forms. The first letter is written in such a way as to also form a crescent, which, along with the green background, helps make the flag of the country where I grew up (Pakistan). The crescent and star represent my religion, Islam, a religion of peace, justice and equality, but note that the star is faded as compared to the one on the U.S. flag to depict the unfortunate current situation of the Muslim world comprising one-fifth of the humanity. The shape of the second letter indicates my upright and straightforward nature, despite my stooped spine. The third letter appears floating and trying to keep its head above the water, even though some of the water has spilled over into its cup-shaped component. This signifies that we all struggle in our lives and overcome hardships in order to succeed in pursuing happy and productive



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lives. The fourth letter happens to resemble the femoral prosthesis and is shown imbedded in white cement, reflecting my bilateral hip joint replacements.

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