Strive To Maintain Our Compassion For Others

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I vividly remember the first day my medical school classmates and I met our cadavers in the anatomy lab. Large body bags lay on metal tables that had been bolted to the floor. I remember the sheer size of the bags best. No doubt existed in my mind that dead human bodies indeed lay within them. And yet part of me couldn't quite grasp that I was actually going to soon be unzipping them and cutting into flesh through which blood had once flowed as freely as it now did in mine. I vividly remember also a classmate of mine—one who'd struck me as being particularly sensitive to others—leaning against the wall at one point, looking pale and shaky. I remember worrying that she was going to faint.

But she didn't. And like the rest of us, soon she was cutting into her cadaver with focused precision. Within only one week we all had habituated to the notion that we were dissecting dead people as if they were only mannequins, as well as to the smell of the preservative in which our cadavers had all been soaked. Even on the most bizarre day of our anatomy experience—the one during in which we had to saw off our cadavers' legs, carry them on our shoulders to the lab's sinks, and wash out the leftover detritus—none of us became woozy or even emotionally disturbed by what we were doing at all.

My classmate eventually went on to become my colleague, one with whom I've since shared many patients. And though technically she was always excellent, again and again it would get back to me from patients to whom I'd send her that she had a poor bedside manner. And whenever I'd hear this, I'd wonder: had she always been only peripherally interested in the suffering of others (as more than one of my patients judged her to be) or did she begin as empathetic and compassionate as I'd first judged her and simply have those characteristics pounded out of her by her training and subsequent years in practice?

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