'Life, it's like a tooth' Teaching medical humanities

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Professional work of any sort tends to narrow the mind, to limit the point of view and to put a hall-mark on a man of a most unmistakable kind. William Osler, *'Aequanimitas'*

'Life, it's like a tooth': so starts a short poem by Boris Vian, a 20th-century French poet. I remember finding a copy of the poem when I was about 10, pasted neatly into my brother's exercise book. *'La vie, c'est comme une dent'*: I laughed out loud when reading that first line, and for many years this was my favourite poem.

So, how is life like a tooth? Let's pursue this ludicrous analogy for a moment. Perhaps Vian is poking fun at the crowds of poets, philosophers and novelists who, in centuries past, tried so hard to explain what 'life' is. In eight short lines, and using the analogy of a simple tooth, Vian can apparently answer the question just as well as any philospher. The comma after the word 'life' creates

a solemn, reflective pause which is then shattered by the absurdity of 'tooth' at the end of the line. Life, with all its enigmatic nobility, lies at one end; and at the other, a mundane, solitary tooth.

Perhaps 'life' is too vague a term. The word has too many meanings. Perhaps this plurality of meanings explains why nearly everyone struggles to uncover the analogy. I don't think Vian is referring only to biological life, but rather to the process of day-to-day 'living'. Doctors know more than most about biological life. From their first days at medical school they've been trained to seek answers to questions about biological life: What is it? What can go wrong with it? How can you tell if something's wrong? What can you do to put things right again? And so on. But isn't biological life useless on its own if it holds no meaning, or if we can't do anything with it? Patients in a persistent vegetative state are alive, but they're not really 'living'. We could say biological life has *instrumental* value: it's valuable because without it we can't enjoy anything else. Of course, some people disagree, and claim that a life even without 'living' is valuable. But back to the poem…

It continues: 'At first, we didn't think about it/We were happy just to munch' (*D'abord on y a pas pensé On s'est contenté de mâcher*). It's surprising how many people – even intelligent adults – never pause to reflect on their life. They jump over every hurdle, occasionally knocking down a few, but never bother to look back. Their eyes are focused on the next obstacle without their ever asking themselves why they're jumping in the first place. They don't reflect on the significance, purpose or value of their lives – until, perhaps, they stumble on the last hurdle. Have you heard a dying patient say: 'I've wasted my life'? Some do. And no doubt others think it. Can this really

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Boris Vian in 1957.

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Box:

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D'abord on y a pas pensé

On s'est contenté de mâcher

Et puis ça se gâte soudain

Ça vous fait mal, et on y tient

Et on la soigne et les soucis

Et pour qu'on soit vraiment guéri

Il faut vous l'arracher, la vie

Extract from 'Je Voudrais Pas Crever' by B. Vian
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Boris Vian

Boris Vian (1920–59) was a French poet and jazz musician. His 'tooth' was extracted, unexpectedly, when he was 39. For more information about Boris Vian and a copy of this and other poems by Vian, see: http://www.poesies.be/Les.Grands.Auteurs/Vian.Boris/

be the first time they've reflected on the way they've lived their life?

Between you and me, I know of medical students who never brush their teeth, and have chronic halitosis. They learn thousands of medical facts, and regurgitate them verbatim in exams, but when they eventually become doctors, their oral hygiene does not improve. And some patients are repelled by them. Those halitotic medics apply their skills mechanically, with no hint of the reflection so prized by William Osler. In 1903, in a speech to the New Haven Medical Association, Osler said: 'the education of the heart–the moral side of the man–must keep pace with the education of the head. Our fellow creatures cannot be dealt with as man deals in corn and coal.'

Here are the last five lines of Vian's poem:

Then suddenly, it flares up (*Et puis ça se gâte soudain*)
It really hurts, and you want to keep it (*Ça vous fait mal, et on y tient*) And you nurse it and you worry (*Et on la soigne et les soucis*) And to be definitely cured (*Et pour qu'on soit vraiment guéri*) They must rip it out, your life. (*Il faut vous l'arracher, la vie*)

The translation is clumsy, but so is the original French text, quite deliberately so. There's not a single full stop until the end of the poem. It's one long, continuous sentence connected with an inordinate number of 'and's. The poem reflects, in its form, the discomfort of toothache. Despite the reader's wish for order and respite (if not a full stop, then please, just a comma to let me catch my breath!) the clauses proliferate out of control. No quick-fix treatment will relieve this toothache. No anaesthetic or drug will help. It's too late. In the last line, that mocking comma from the first line returns, truly solemn this time, to announce the end of the agony. The comma acts as a final gasp. It is during that pause, after the disclosure of the grim prognosis, that the dying patient diagnoses his life. Then, after the pain, the liberating full stop. The poem closes with the same words as it opened, but how quickly the mood has changed. In the space of eight short lines, the empty, carefree life of the first line has deteriorated beyond recognition. How rapid the change from indifference to concern, from contentment to despair, and from life to death!

The doctors and dentists enter the scene late in the poem. They deal primarily with the pain, but, for Vian, the true horror is not so much the physical pain, but the belated realisation that the patient/poet in fact *values* what is threatened. Although it is obvious to him now, he failed to recognise it before. The writer never bothered, in his mind, to look at the meaning of his actions. The indelible regret, the inability to alleviate the pain, and the impossibility of going back in time constitute the true tragedy of the poem. The pain is internal rather than physical, although the physical has served as a trigger for the internal. Some doctors are acutely aware of this less palpable, private, gnawing type of pain; but others may dismiss it as trivial, delusional or irrelevant to the therapy.

The primary purpose of teaching medical humanities is to foster reflection among doctors and medical students. It is no grander than that. Medical humanities will not rid us of substandard doctors, but it may make a difference to *some* practitioners, if not in their daily activities, at least in their understanding of what medicine means to them. It may encourage some doctors to cultivate a greater awareness of patients' *internal* pain. Teaching people to reflect is quite different from teaching them the functions of the liver or the diagnosis of Guillain-Barré syndrome.

I have used a little-known French poem to show how incomprehension can be translated into meaning. Through different types of translation, a foreign language became a familiar one (translating words), and an obscure analogy was gradually illuminated (translating meaning). Through their own translations, anyone can clarify existing meanings and discover new ones. These meanings and personal reflections may contribute to the 'education of the heart'.

There is no ideal way of encouraging meaningful reflection. Each teacher will have his or her own favourite method. I have, in a practical manner, displayed mine.