Interview Topics
THE ENEMY
A new collection of poetry by Rafael Campo

Publication date: April 2007

Rafael Campo is available to answer these and other questions:

Doctors are supposed to be dispassionate scientists. Why would a doctor write poetry?

These days, with all the dehumanizing changes in medicine, from the constraints of managed care to the imperatives of new technologies, how does a doctor make use of poetry?

Another challenge for many doctors these days is having to deal with an increasingly multicultural patient population, as America itself becomes more diverse. Might poetry have relevance in responding to these changes?

Recent scientific studies that suggest creative self-expression (specifically writing) can help patients who are living with chronic diseases have generated much media attention. Do you ever use poetry directly with your patients? Do you think poetry can be healing? Is medicine still an art?

Do you think that poetry has a significant role in the training of aspiring physicians? Can empathy for human suffering really be taught?

What do other physicians think of your identity as a nationally recognized poet who is sometimes critical of medicine and who writes about what some might view as controversial subject matter?

What do your patients think of your poetry?

Some have pronounced poetry an elitist, dying art form in America, while “spoken word” poetry is making headlines these days along with hip-hop artists who might claim to be poets, and commercially successful ones at that. What do you think is true about American poetry’s “health” and viability? What is your response to the poetry slams, “rap poetry,” and the like?

Your poetry frequently alludes to your clinical work with people living with AIDS, who are oftentimes stigmatized and marginalized in American culture. Why do you find it so compelling to write about them? Some have said AIDS is “old news,” with the advent of new more effective treatments. What is your view of the AIDS epidemic? Do you feel yourself implicated in the AIDS community not just as a doctor, but as a poet?

William Carlos Williams is considered by many to be perhaps the most important American poet, and he was also a physician. How do you view his work? Are there other physician-writers whose work you admire?
You studied poetry at Boston University with U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott. What was that experience like? How did you integrate your rigorous medical studies with your study of the craft of poetry?

Your own poetry examines issues relating to your identity as a Latino, the Cuban-American child of immigrant parents. How does poetry help you to make sense of America? Of your ethnic roots? You recently participated in an important nationwide poetry conference sponsored by the Poetry Society of America called “What’s American about American Poetry?” Do you consider yourself an American poet?

Your poetry also explicitly explores your gay identity. Was poetry important to you in your coming out process, especially in the context of your other profession, medicine? What is it like to be gay in such a conservative field? How does your sexuality figure into your sense of yourself as Latino? As an American poet?

Which poets and writers have influenced your work?

Your poetry employs many traditional verse forms, which some might see as incongruous with your often unconventional subject matter. What do you think of the “free verse versus new formalism” debate?

What new projects are you currently working on?

Rafael Campo teaches and practices general internal medicine at Harvard Medical School and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. He is the author of several books of poetry, including Landscape with Human Figure, winner of the Gold Medal in poetry from ForeWord; Diva, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Paterson Poetry Prize; and What the Body Told, winner of a Lambda Literary Award for poetry; all also published by Duke University Press. He has written two books of essays, The Healing Art: A Doctor’s Black Bag of Poetry and The Poetry of Healing: A Doctor’s Education in Empathy, Identity, and Desire, winner of a Lambda Literary Award for memoir. His poetry and essays have appeared in periodicals including The New England Journal of Medicine, The New York Times Magazine, The Los Angeles Times, The Nation, The New Republic, Out, The Paris Review, and The Washington Post Book World.

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