

Dr. Williams Brings me the News: Reflections of a Musician/Doctor

Men die miserably every day. I know this well. In the Emergency Room, where I spend much of my work life, suffering is before me as a routine. Like Williams I am a medical doctor. Also like Williams, I am first an artist; in my case not a poet but rather a pianist and composer.

The privilege of the physician is to be invited into a life in a crucial moment; to listen and hopefully sometimes to heal. Williams captured this well in the stories in the collection, "The Farmer's Daughters". He fed his art with these experiences. I try to do the same though admittedly for the musician the connection is less obvious than for the poet.

I might never have studied medicine were it not for the example of Dr. Williams. At age fifteen I saw a televised documentary about him which included interviews and a scene filmed in his office with crying babies in the waiting room and Williams banging out a few lines of poetry in between patients on the typewriter which he then slammed abruptly back into his desk. His typewriter was mounted on a spring-loaded shelf which hid it in the desk; not an uncommon device in the 1950's. Having hidden the typewriter he called in his next patient. I have carried that image with me throughout my life. It has given me hope that one could develop as an artist amid the controlled chaos of a generalist clinician's life.

I don't mean to elevate myself to Williams' level but only to say that he provided an example for me; that medicine could nourish the artist if the medical life was kept under some internal control. His act of slamming the typewriter away, with a definite element of irritation at having his train of thought as a poet interrupted, and then recovering his demeanor as a doctor, so as to not transmit his irritation to his patient, provides an image I have carried with me now for some fifty years. A concrete example of what the physician-artist must do. (A thing; an image. "No ideas but in things")

When in 2007 I gave myself a nine-month sabbatical from medicine to do some writing for orchestra I produced a work for orchestra and piano which I think of as a musical response to Williams' epic poem, "Paterson". My work, also titled "Paterson", is not a piano concerto. There is no dramatic battle between the solo instrument and the orchestra. The piano is more of a narrator in the sense of Greek drama and of course following the example of Williams' poem; the piano, the man and the orchestra, the city.

This music has not had a live performance but in collaboration with my good friend Jonathan Sinagub, photographer, graphic artist and architect, I have prepared a website with excerpts of the work realized electronically and accompanied by his wonderful videos and photos. It can be previewed at the "resources" section of the conference website. Hopefully that limited "demo" can convey something of what both Jonathan and I seek to convey in our responses to Williams' work.