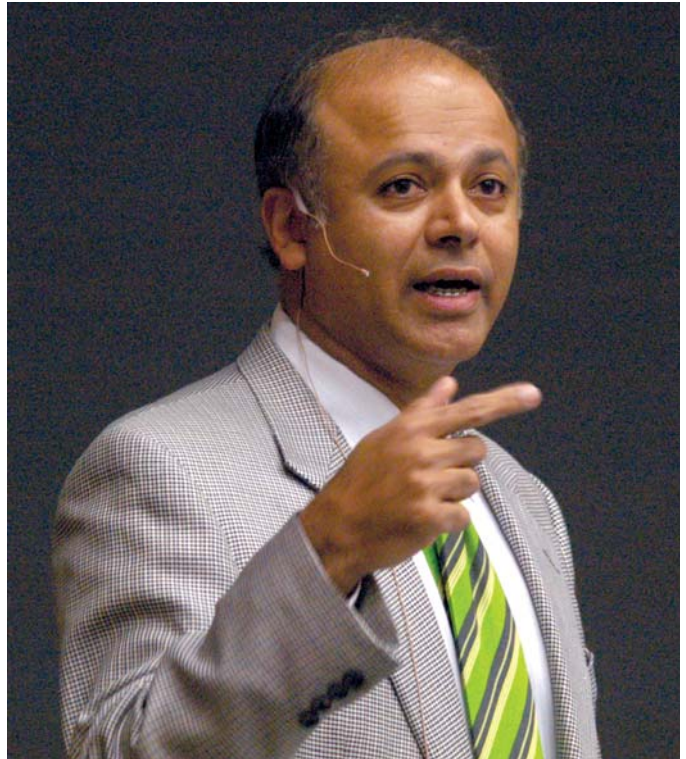


Dr. Verghese, who directs the Center for Medical Humanities and Ethics, holds the Joaquin Cigarroa Jr. Chair and is the Marvin Forland Distinguished Professor of Medicine. In 2005, he was appointed Master of the American College of Physician and also elected to membership in the Association of American Physicians, a distinct honor since the group is almost uniformly basic research scientists and indicative of the fact that his writing and teaching related to internal medicine of the past 15 years have become mainstream.



Q&A

with Dr. Abraham Verghese

Abraham Verghese in Conversation with Sharmishta Koushik of the *Sunday Times* of India.

Q: How do you think your books have helped the cause of AIDS awareness?

When I wrote about my experiences with HIV, I really thought that I was telling the story of a mysterious coming together of people with HIV in a small rural town. But inevitably, I suppose, a secondary part of the story became my own personal voyage and the change that I was going through in getting to know gay men. I had to overcome my “homo-ignorance” and I found I had developed not just empathy for gay men, but a sense of regret that it took a disease like this for me to understand gay culture and to see how much I had to learn about being a heterosexual man from gay men.

The book was intensely personal. As a result, to my surprise, it is a book that allowed many to read about a subject that they thought they had no interest in. It particularly allowed fathers and mothers of gay sons to understand them better. There were some beautiful books about HIV out by that time – *And the Band Played On*, and others. But it was perhaps too easy for people to dismiss them as being written by gay men, which was unfair. In my book, a heterosexual could see the issue from my point of view. What is most gratifying is the

letters from college students and medical students who say the book, *My Own Country*, had a lot to do with their going into medicine. I treasure those letters.

Q: In your lecture, you spoke about doctors as catalysts for a story. What was that moment that made you pick up your pen and write down those stories?

I had been writing all along as a teenager and a college student, but mostly in a casual way, for my journal. It was the AIDS experience that made my journals an important way for me to delve into not just the extraordinary things I was seeing, but also to explore my conflicted reactions to the events of the day. I also found a great liberation in writing fiction. I could, by that vehicle, correct the things in the fictional world I had created – I could play God!

Nowadays, I find that I write in order to understand what I am thinking. There is something about the act of writing – utterly mysterious – that brings about some insights that I don’t get when just sitting and brooding about a subject.

Q: You've written two memoirs and several essays. What was the impulse to write about real events and people as opposed to an autobiographical novel?

My goal was to write fiction and I arrived at non-fiction by accident. One of my early short stories was a dark fictional piece for the



New Yorker magazine called *Lilacs*. That story led the editors at the *New Yorker* to invite me to submit a proposal for a long non-fiction piece about AIDS in rural America. They ultimately did not take the piece, but I was left with what was, in essence, a book proposal. There was great interest in this from publishers and before I knew it, I had a contract to write a non-fiction book and that became *My Own Country*. I really had to learn from scratch how to do that, and I simply went back to the great non-fiction writers I admired and tried to see how they did it. I am talking about Nabokov, Naipaul, Orwell and others.

When I finished the first book, there was great encouragement from my publishers to come up with a second non-fiction book. As it turned out I had lived through an extraordinary personal experience with a close friend who was my student, then my intern and my tennis partner. His descent into drug addiction and the whole phenomenon of addiction became a story to tell. Hence, *The Tennis Partner*.

Q. It's been a long time since your last book was published. Are you working on a new book right now? Do you plan to write a work of fiction?

I have been working on a novel called *Cutting For Stone* for far too long now. I was determined after *The Tennis Partner* to get back to fiction and I knew I wanted to tell an epic medical story. I had a voice, a feel, a sensibility in mind, certain geographies I wanted to contrast.

After about a year or more of working on it, I decided to try and sell the book based on the first hundred or so pages. My agent wasn't keen on our doing that, and it is not the norm for a novel. But I wanted some affirmation that it

was worth continuing, particularly since books come slowly for me, given my day job. I am a full-time physician with a big teaching load and a busy hospital and clinic practice. Luckily for me, the publishers we showed it to liked it, and Knopf bought the rights. I have the end in sight now. There are technical challenges, challenges to do with voice, structure – things like that. But I suppose the biggest challenge is to carve out the time for the novel,

The book begins with a nun, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, giving birth to twins in an operating theater in a mission hospital in Africa. One of the twins becomes the narrator for the story. I have done a lot of research to steep myself in geography, to get textbooks that reflect the medicine of that period – things like that.

In terms of a theme, I suppose the book shows how often people go into medicine because of being wounded and wanting to heal themselves. It shows the corollary of that as well: how the profession can destroy a person, make him or her lose what was of greatest value in life. I have had fun with the book, putting in all my passions and peeves. The ultimate goal for any novel is simply a good story well told – story is everything. Secondly I hope I can capture how much I love the practice of medicine, the caring for patients, the interaction with students, the constant way that medicine humbles you and the way that your patients educate you. And just when you think you have done it for enough years to know something, to be cunning, to be wise, you discover instead that all you really have discovered is the extent of your ignorance and how much more there is to know. ■

