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Diagnosis: Author

Physician Turned To Writing to Heal Himself, Others

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NASHVILLE Nearly two decades ago, when Abraham Verghese put his career as a physician on hold to try his

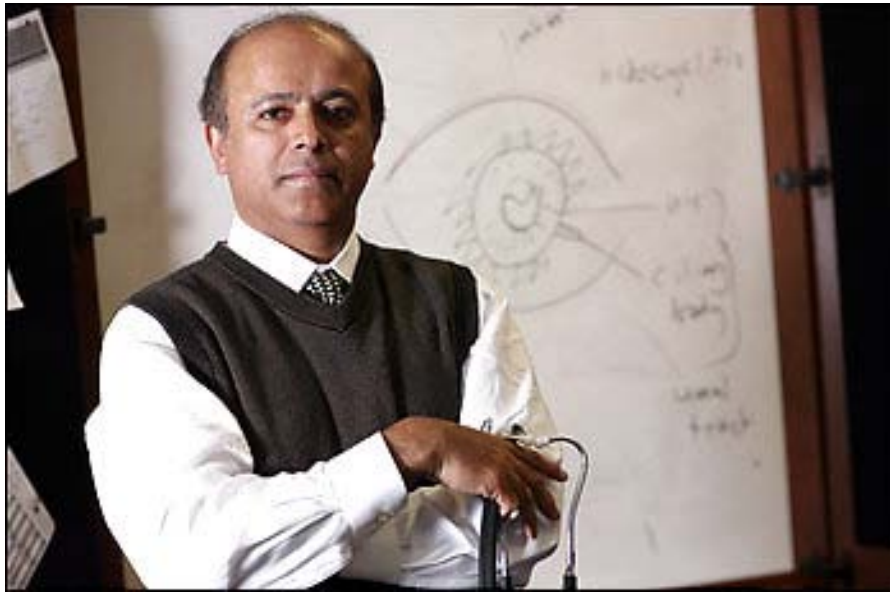
his immersion in the then-untreatable disease, he quit his job, cashed in his 401(k) plan and headed for the Iowa

of books "just to find out what the hell they were talking about."

What he *did* know was that his time in Iowa was something he couldn't afford to waste.

"I was taking care of people my age who were dying," he says. "The constant feeling, hearing from them, was that life is transient and can end very quickly, so don't postpone your dreams."

Nineteen years later, Verghese's dream of writing has carried him to a packed auditorium at Vanderbilt University's medical school. Maybe 300 white-coated doctors and students -- some carrying worn copies of "My Own Country," the nonfiction book about his Johnson City experience that he published in 1994 -- have assembled on a frigid January morning for grand rounds. These weekly sessions, in which medical eminences address urgent professional questions, are normally devoted to "arguing about some disease," as department of medicine Chairman Eric Neilson puts it.



Dr. Abraham Verghese in his Stanford office. (Thor Swift for The Washington Post)

hand at fiction, he knew he wanted to write an "epic medical novel."

Beyond that, things were a little vague.

Verghese, an internist specializing in infectious disease who's now on the faculty at Stanford's medical school, spent the late 1980s in Johnson City, Tenn., ministering to the first wave of AIDS patients to surface there. Needing a break from

Writers' Workshop.

He arrived in Iowa City in 1990 not knowing what to expect. He carried his briefcase to his first workshop meeting, then sat quietly as his work-boots-and-jeans-wearing peers tossed around the names of writers he'd never heard of or didn't know well. Barth! Babel! Cheever! Verghese wrote down the names and headed for the library, where he would check out armfuls

Not today.

Verghese's topic is "The Pen and the Stethoscope: What Writing Can Teach Us About Medicine." Over the next hour, he merges insights from his twinned careers.

He says harried doctors must understand that to every patient, illness is a *story*. He turns the death of the great writer-physician Anton Chekhov into a parable of humane medical care. He shows how the concept of the epiphany applies to both fiction and medical diagnosis.

He doesn't mention "Cutting for Stone," the hefty, old-fashioned novel he's finally written. (The Washington Post's reviewer called it "masterful"; Verghese will read from it tonight at Politics and Prose.) But in the question period, someone asks for "a sentence-or-two teaser."

"It's very much a medical epic," Verghese says. "It begins with a nun, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, giving birth to twins in an operating room in a mission hospital in Africa. And the father is there, a British surgeon, but he does not know exactly how he could be the father."

A few seconds later, he smiles and stops.

"I won't tell you more. I hope you'll read it," he says, to prolonged laughter and applause.

'I Left Nothing Out'

Verghese's mother was not a nun. Unlike his protagonist, he is not a surgeon. He has no twin brother. And despite the remarkable life he has lived, nothing in it approaches the intensity of the climax he invented for the fictional brothers Marion and Shiva Stone.

Yet he is, like Marion, a physician of Indian parentage, raised in Ethiopia, who ended up in the United States. And whatever the biographical parallels, it's obvious that Verghese has poured his personal and professional soul into "Cutting for Stone."

"It's all there. I left nothing out," he says with a rueful laugh.

Behind the lectern, Verghese appears poised. Actually, he is nervous. He rehearsed his talk the night before, then rose early to rehearse again. "The very fact that I'm up there speaking at Vanderbilt is an anomaly," he says later. "Most foreign physicians are invisible around here."

He has felt like an outsider his whole life. At 53, he knows that won't change.

Verghese's parents were Christians from India's Kerala state who left home to teach in the schools that Ethiopia's emperor, Haile Selassie, was building. This made their three sons expatriates from

birth. But Verghese's insecurities extended beyond national identity. When he was around 9, his parents entered a quarrelsome phase and he sensed -- wrongly, it turned out -- that their marriage was imploding. Imagining himself somehow responsible, he developed what he has called "a precocious anxiety that could only be obliterated by constant activity."

He obsessed over tennis.

He filled tiny notebooks with observations on people around him, fancying himself a spy.

He also read voraciously. And it was reading that introduced him to what he calls the "romantic, exciting, slightly mysterious" world of medicine.

In particular, he loved A.J. Cronin's novel "The Citadel," with its portrait of a young doctor in a coal mining town, and W. Somerset Maugham's "Of Human Bondage." Maugham's protagonist wants to paint but isn't good enough. Turning to medicine, he walks into his first outpatient clinic and is delighted to find "humanity there in the rough, the materials the artist worked on."

Verghese started medical school in Ethiopia. Political chaos drove him out before he could finish. His parents had already left and in 1973

he joined them in New Jersey, where he found work emptying bedpans as a hospital orderly.

Continuing his medical training in the United States would have meant starting from scratch, and Verghese wasn't considering that possibility. To hear him tell it, he was happy simply to have escaped the violence in Ethiopia, to have a steady job, a car, a girlfriend.

His older brother, now an MIT engineering professor, recalls the situation differently. "I think that's the most discouraged I've seen him," George Verghese says.

One day at the hospital, Abraham Verghese ran across a copy of "Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine" and was overwhelmed by nostalgia. "I had learned that book inside out," he says, "and I just had this great sense that I could not let all that go."

He got himself back into medical school, this time in Madras, India. He married. He returned to the states for a residency in Johnson City and, after a fellowship in Boston, headed back to Tennessee just as AIDS was making itself known there.

The irony was tremendous. He had chosen his specialty in part because he was caught up in "the conceit of cure," the sense that doctors can fix anything, and infectious

disease in particular seemed to be "all about cure." Now his patients faced a deadly plague for which no cure was known.

Out of despair, not knowing what else to do, he started leaving "the medical-industrial complexes I worked in" to visit patients in their homes.

The results amazed him. His presence seemed to help them come to terms with their illness. And "I began to realize what it was the horse-and-buggy doctors of a century ago had to offer.

"They had no penicillin. They had no drugs. They were not dispensing cures -- but they were dispensing healing."

Finally, Fiction

When Verghese got to the writers' workshop in 1990, AIDS stories poured out of him. He filled them with passages like this one, in which Bobby, the AIDS-wracked narrator of a story called "Lilacs," introduces himself to a fellow patient in a clinic waiting room:

" 'Let me guess. You tested positive -- what, two years ago? And you were positive before that but didn't want the test. And now you wake up in the night and you feel cold and you put on socks and wrap your head up, and then in an hour you drench the sheets. And then you feel cold again. That's why you

didn't shower, right? You were cold when it was time to have a shower. Am I right?' "

The new guy gets up to leave.

" 'Sit down,' Bobby says to him. 'You can't afford not to listen to me. You need to listen to me. I'm a survivor -- nine years. If you don't want to live, just keep walking.' "

No one in Iowa was writing quite like this. "In the workshop, you saw a lot of dating stories," says Verghese's classmate Tom Grimes.

"My writing was primitive and crude in a way, but it was shocking, it had *stuff* in it," Verghese says. "And stuff beyond most people's imagination."

"Lilacs" found its way to literary agent Mary Evans. She sold it to the New Yorker, which published the story in October 1991, not long after Verghese accepted a job at a teaching hospital in El Paso.

Suddenly, he wasn't just a doctor anymore.

Intrigued by his Tennessee experience, the New Yorker asked for a nonfiction proposal. The magazine piece didn't happen, but Evans helped him sell the idea as a book.

"My Own Country" evoked the emotionally fraught, often heroic lives and deaths of

Verghese's Johnson City patients, and it told a broader story as well: how an "urban" disease colonized rural communities. A finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, it became a Showtime movie and, for medical students in particular, an essential text about the AIDS epidemic.

Yet its lasting appeal within the profession, Verghese believes, derives in large part from his decision to open the doctor's emotions to scrutiny as well.

His 1998 book, "The Tennis Partner," got even more personal. Woven through the narrative of his friendship with a self-destructive med student is the story of Verghese's failed first marriage -- during which, he says now, his obsessions with AIDS and writing blinded him to "the ordinary existence I had that was so precious."

He worried, however, that confessional writing was becoming a tic on which he was too dependent.

Hadn't he set out to be a fiction writer? It was time to start "Cutting for Stone" -- though he still didn't have much to start *with*.

"I had a scene of a nun giving birth to twins," Verghese recalls, "and I built on that and built on that." A hundred pages in, his major characters had emerged organically from that opening scene.

There were the twins themselves, Marion and Shiva, joined at the head and needing immediate surgical separation. There was their mother, who dies giving birth, and their grief-crazed father, who disappears. And there were the two mission-hospital doctors -- jack-of-all-trades Abhi Ghosh and no-nonsense gynecologist Kalpana Hemlatha -- who would raise the twins while embodying everything Verghese admires about hands-on medical care.

It was a good enough start for Evans to sell the novel to a high-end publisher, Alfred A. Knopf. But when Verghese's editor, Robin Desser, asked what happened next, he had to confess he didn't know.

Verghese says he thinks Desser was "scandalized" by this. Desser prefers to recall how excited she was by his initial submission.

"I just flipped when I read it," she says. "It had so many things a great novel would have right away."

That didn't stop her from raising the alarm a couple of years ago when he was floundering.

"Abraham, you have to come to New York," Verghese remembers her telling him. "We have to talk."

"Cutting for Stone" was two-thirds written. Marion and Shiva, wildly different

personalities whose fates were intertwined, were about to be separated again, this time geographically. Marion was leaving Ethiopia for an internship at the kind of inner-city American hospital that is forced to staff itself with foreign physicians.

Any number of plot developments seemed possible.

But in order to finish his novel, Desser told Verghese, he simply *had* to know how the twins' story was going to end.

iPatients and Chekhov

Wildly different personalities whose fates were intertwined: We might be talking about Verghese the doctor and Verghese the writer.

Yet those personalities aren't as split as they seem. And when it comes to how Verghese's story ends -- well, his twinned careers have started to converge.

Ralph Horwitz, who chairs Stanford's school of medicine, understands this convergence as well as anyone. Horwitz recruited Verghese to fill two separate but closely related roles.

First, he wanted Verghese to supervise students during their internal-medicine rotations -- and in particular, to teach them how to do bedside exams.

A layman might wonder why one needs a specialist for this. But as technology has come to dominate modern medicine, doctors have taken to monitoring what Verghese calls "iPatients" through computerized hospital data, and direct doctor-patient interaction has become something of a lost art.

"Abraham is among the most skilled bedside clinicians I've ever encountered," Horwitz says, and he has an even rarer ability "to connect the clinical examination to the deeper ideals of medicine."

This brings us to Verghese's second role. Horwitz sees him as a public intellectual whose writing can spark discussion of a crucial problem: how to reconcile medicine's scientific and technical side with its "humanistic or Samaritan foundation."

To that end, he offered his recruit an unusual perk -- a second, hidden office without his name on it. There, two

days a week, he could write anything he wanted.

"Medicine is very much about narratives," Horwitz says. "It is about a patient's story and how you come to understand it." By embedding this concept in his own work, Verghese can help shape the story of medicine itself.

Or at least he can try, as he's doing right now in Nashville.

On the screen behind him is a black-and-white photograph of a Russian luminary. "Want to venture a guess as to who this might be?" Verghese asks.

"Chekhov," someone says.

Chekhov it is. Verghese wants to tell the story of how he died -- and more to the point, how his physician behaved at his bedside.

Knowing that tuberculosis would soon kill him, Chekhov felt an urge to travel. His wife took him to a

spa in Germany, where a crisis ensued. The spa physician decided to send for an oxygen pillow.

"What's the use, doctor?" Chekhov is reported to have said. "Before that arrives, I will be a corpse."

The doctor changed his mind and ordered champagne.

Chekhov emptied a glass, lay down quietly on his side and died.

"I've done some very unusual things at the bedside," Verghese tells his listeners. "But I don't think I ever would have thought of ordering a bottle of champagne."

He sounds like a doctor who thinks he's been somehow remiss -- and like a writer who wishes he'd conjured that ending himself.