Case Histories: patient and physician narratives of self and disease

Professor: Allison Kavey, Ph.D.
Contact: akavey@jjay.cuny.edu
Class Time: Wednesday 6:30-8:30 via Zoom
Office Hours: by appointment, via Zoom

Disease is the great equalizer. We will all be patients eventually. But who are we to the physicians who encounter our pathological selves, who are we to ourselves, and who are doctors under those white coats? This class endeavors to use disease as a common ground to discuss case histories as autobiographical and biographical tools. We will read physician memoirs to better understand how they imagine themselves as people and professionals, and how they relate to their oddly narrative art—the act of writing is embedded in medical practice through case notes. We will read patient memoirs and think about the nature of pain, the ways in which disease shapes us and how we resist its warping, and think about the person behind the case histories. In short, this is a course that looks through both sides of the patient-physician mirror to try to grasp some very human truths.

The first part of the course focuses on the history of medicine, using scholarly articles from the history of medicine and patient and physician narratives to demonstrate both changes in medical practice and attitude and the constancy of patient and practitioner roles and struggles. The second part of the course is deeply modern—in fact, present—and includes modern patient and practitioner narratives combined with the words of practitioners and patients willing to give us their time. We will hear from a brave infectious diseases specialist who started the first HIV clinic in upstate NY, an HIV+ physician diagnosed in the 1980s who had to choose between his privacy and his profession, a pediatric cardiologist detailing the daily reality of working with very sick children, a large animal veterinarian who has spent his career coaxing horses and their humans back to life, a stage 4 bone cancer patient on living with untreatable cancer, and ... Colleen??

Readings: Online, listed in the syllabus and available via Blackboard

Means of Evaluation:

Meaningful and consistent class participation (demonstrating knowledge of assigned sources, engagement with speakers, willingness to be respectful of others’ views while engaging in scholarly argument, ability to reference and effectively introduce relevant material from outside the course)—20%

10 short reviews of readings (Your choice of readings, no more than 1 single-spaced page each, the goal for scholarly works is to define the argument, discuss the evidence, and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the argument and for literary or historical sources to consider how you would use the source in your own work)—30%

Final paper proposal: topic, primary source review, scholarly source review, introduction (no more than 5 pages)—10%

Final paper: 10-15 pages, topic of your choice, biography or scholarly analysis, brilliant—40%

Week One: 8/25
Introductions
Week Two: 9/1 Early modern health and disease

Week Three: 9/8 No class

Week Four: 9/15 No class

Week Five: 9/22 Breast cancer-c18-20—Fanny Burney
Read/see: Fanny Burney Mastectomy Diary—read the transcript: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/letter-from-frances-burney-to-her-sister-esther-about-her-mastectomy
Read: excerpt from *A Darker Ribbon* re: breast cancer in the early 20th century

Week Six: 9/29 Early modern widwifery and pediatrics
Read: Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Diary of Martha Ballard* (Excerpts)

Week Seven: 10/6 Early modern epidemics
Read: Caulfield, "The Great Throat Distemper of 1735-1740” part 2

Week Eight: 10/13 Modern Epidemics—encephalitis lethargica
Read: Oliver Sacks, M.D. *Awakenings* excerpts;
Watch: *Awakenings* (dir. Penny Marshall) available on Amazon

Week Nine: 10/20 Modern Epidemics—polio
Read: Maurice Becker, "polio narrative"

Week Ten: 10/27 3 Modern Epidemics—AIDS
Speaker: Dr. William M. Valenti, Dept of Infectious Diseases, University of Rochester Medical Campus
Week Eleven: 11/3  Modern Epidemics--AIDS
Speaker: Lawrence Stern, M.D.
Watch: "The Normal Heart" (available through amazon)

Week Twelve: 11/10 Modern Epidemics--AIDS
Speaker: Lawrence Stern, M.D.
Watch: “The Normal Heart” (available through amazon)

Week Thirteen: 11/17 Pediatrics
Speaker: Rae-Ellen Kavey, M.D.
Read: Excerpts Perri Klass, Other Women’s Children (NY: Random House, 1990)

Week Fourteen: Thanksgiving, no class

Week Fifteen: 12/1 Patienthood
Speaker: Bettina Drummond, Living with cancer

Week Sixteen: 12/8 Conclusions