

JANIS CAROL AMATUZIO, M.D.

Our Luminary for this Medical Reflections issue is a locally bred and professionally trained distinguished Forensic Pathologist. She is also a writer of some renown, a wife, a horsewoman, a loving daughter and a continual student of the human condition. The foundational influences in her successful professional career have been profound, the earliest of which may well have begun when—as an adolescent—she accompanied her physician father on house calls. She noted his great compassion and ability to give comfort to those in need—characteristics that became indelibly etched into the infrastructure of her future journey.

Let's depart from our usual Luminary narrative and “listen” to Dr. Janis Amatuzio's story in her own words . . .



“Being Seen” In the Coroner's Office

Dr. Donald Amatuzio, my father, was a physician who practiced internal medicine in Minneapolis. His example inspired me to follow his footsteps into medicine and be just like him; an internist as well. As I approached completion of my medical studies, he began urging me to study pathology. He said “pathology” would always be the perennial basis of medicine. To me, pathology seemed so tedious, so meticulous, and far less exciting than other new, emerging subspecialties of medicine. I balked at first; I didn't want to take his advice.

But he persisted, and eventually, I listened and transferred from an internal medicine residency into a pathology residency at the brand new Hennepin County Medical Center. My father was not surprised when I found the study of pathology *very* exciting, even *cutting edge*; my knowledge rocketed, along with deeper understandings of disease, health, and injury. I was guided by some of the most legendary of teachers of the day; Dr. Robert Anderson, Dr. Calvin Bandt, and the Hennepin County Medical Examiner,

Dr. John Coe at HCMC; and Dr. Patrick C. J. Ward, Dr. Charles Horowitz, and Dr. Desmond Burke at Mount Sinai Hospital in Minneapolis.

These teachers were giants; they made profound impacts as they taught us to recognize and diagnose disease. For the next five years I virtually lived in the recesses of the clinical laboratories and the morgue. I concluded *pathology* was fascinating, but *pathologists* were always kept well hidden, in dark windowless rooms.

What I didn't see coming during that time, was my nascent fascination with forensics. It seemed to take root insidiously within the cool, silent recesses of the new morgue hidden beneath the Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Office.

Down there, the meticulous search for medical answers broadened to include larger questions such as: who are you, what happened, how, and even, why? Although many cases rocked me with their blood and violence, I felt great pleasure by solving these mysteries through application of

forensic and scientific principles, and careful medical practice. Forensic pathology allowed the “truth of the matter” to emerge; it was deeply satisfying.

The subspecialty of forensic pathology began to pull me inexorably, like iron filings to a magnet. Scientific explanations help loved ones resolve the very natural human emotion of grief at the time of death; saying good-bye when one didn’t want to. It was a privilege to “speak for those who had died.” I followed that force.

Mid-career, forensics presented me with a new mystery. Family members occasionally shared their experiences of dreams, visits, and extraordinary synchronicities after the death of someone I had examined. These extraordinary experiences quelled their hearts and deepened their understanding of life. It was apparent in the peace, relief, and deep understanding which flooded their lives and mine. I had no forensic answers to explain these experiences, but was again mesmerized.

A wise teacher once said, “If you look at something closely enough, you begin to see right through it.” I began to see forensics and death investigation as *more* than an examination of a body at a scene or on an autopsy table. Death investigation became life investigation; the examination of a human “being.” I wrote about these experiences in two books, *Forever Ours* (2004) and *Beyond Knowing* (2006). (New World Library). Life seemed larger, deeper, and more astonishing than I ever expected.

Forensic principles say, “When possible, make a positive identification first; then everything starts to fall into place.” We may have too narrowly identified a person by just the physical characteristics of their body. Could the truth of the matter be a human “being” much more than their body? Could the physical body be just the visible and smallest part of the larger invisible energies of a person?

Perhaps the study of medicine will come to realize our “being” stretches far beyond the physical body. Could powerful invisible energies resonate and regulate the body? Inquiry may shift perceptions and open new dimensions and deeper understandings.

A great teacher once remarked that at the end of his career he knew less than at the beginning. Perhaps this is true of all who ask the larger questions such as: What makes some holders of disease and others live vibrantly into old age? Is cancer caused by random stem cell mistakes, or do we shape our health by how we hold and channel our energy? Why do some die so young; bad luck or are they on some level complete?

I have the sense the largest (yet almost unexamined) part of humanity lies in the amazing, mystical, and beautiful

quantum dimensions of our energy; most already know this intuitively. Perhaps we are actually “beings of light” with roots deep in the soil of the immortal pulsating energy of Life. I find hope in this, and prefer it to the sterile thought we are just physical bodies on a spinning planet in a random universe.

To a “reasonable degree of medical certainty,” I believe pathology is the basis of medicine, and forensics a lens into the rich language of Life. This might explain humanity’s “forensic fascination” and mine.

I also believe answers to life’s largest questions will emerge when the scope of “positive identification” is deepened. But that may take awhile because tracing humanity’s invisible roots lies in the exploration of “inner space.” It’s an inside job.

I have never found anything so fascinating; and like before, I’m pulled like iron filings to a magnet by those profound implications.

Dr. Amatuzio combines the scientific, sometimes stark, objectivity in the field of Forensic Pathology with the more ethereal subjectivity of her ongoing exploration of the human condition — and it works! A fruitful product of that approach has been demonstrated with the many understanding contacts she’s had with family members of the “departed.” The compassion she radiates and the comfort she provides to those she serves are not unlike those practiced by her dad so many years ago. He would be proud — as are we. ♦

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Dr. Janis Amatuzio is a physician, a board certified forensic pathologist, and recently retired Chief Medical Examiner of the Anoka County System, Midwest Forensic Pathology Medical Examiner’s Office which includes eight MN counties, and 14 referral counties in both MN and WI. Over the course of her 30-year career in forensic pathology, she has performed thousands of autopsies, and visited the scenes of hundreds of suspicious deaths. She has testified in state and federal court numerous times and considers it an honor to, “Speak for the Dead.” She retired from her position as Chief Medical Examiner in January 2010; is consulting and working to finish her third book.