Facing the trials and noticing the treasures...
..using creativity to rekindle the heart
Dr Louise Younie, BMA, AMA, CMA, International Conference on Doctors Health, 2008

Findings presented are from qualitative research with 17 second year medical students, 2006 regarding their learning experience during a medical humanities Student Selected Component (SSC). This SSC involved personal creative expression in drama, art, music and poetry alongside learning about using the arts in therapeutic interventions for patients.

Artwork and student reflections presented below arose from this eight-week SSC. Student quotes derive from reflective diaries and semi-structured interviews undertaken as part of this research carried out for an MSc dissertation. Ethical approval was obtained.

1. The students discussed the vast range of emotions experienced during their university training.

“...I think that there is a huge, huge emotional undercurrent in the course ... nearly everyone on the [medical] course at some point thinks, ‘... I don’t want to do this, I hate it, it's too much work, I can’t do it.’ I think there’s masses of people that just, you know, come so close to giving up.”

Student Reflection
“I’ve felt every emotion under the sun, and all of them at their extreme. One minute I seem to be laughing and happier than I can remember, the next I’m angry, or sad, or numb. These feelings relate to everything in my life; my course, my family, my image of myself, my friendships... One of the most overwhelming feelings is of being trapped...I often kick myself for not allowing myself the time to do the things I love; dancing, singing, art, reading, climbing, flying my kite...”

2. Collaborative learning and sharing personal reflections was noted by many students to be a rare occurrence.

“That was really lovely, that kind of, I don’t know, sort of getting faith in people again...you don’t get any time to really enjoy people, because you’re just trying to cram stuff in your head...it is very stressful, and you do forget that people are amazing because you just, you just see them when you’re getting p****d because that’s your time off, or when you’re studying really hard, because that’s what you do in the day... You have very little time ...to get in sort of heartfelt discussions...”

“It felt like quite a privilege to listen to people opening up and describing things that really touch and matter to them”
3. Students expressed reservations about right brain work and creative expression.

“I am very apprehensive about writing something creative.”

4. Creativity deepened reflection and broadened perspectives regarding others.

“It (using art) just allowed you to reflect more. I mean you think about things a bit more. It’s like not so black and white you know…”

“because I think it (creativity) allows you to maybe think as a different person. If you write - I mean you can write a piece of poetry as yourself, but you could also say, take on a patient’s mindset and try and write from that. And I think it reminds you of the different aspects of what’s going on and what might be happening for other people. And I think it just opens up - I think that for me doing the creative work just opens up a broader perspective anyway. I think I think more, generally, when I’m doing creative stuff…”

..because I was writing about something personal it forced me to think about what I felt about the event. It was therapeutic to write the poem which was not expected when I was struggling to start

5. The process of creative expression was found to reveal new insights into self and was experienced as therapeutic for some.

“This session was more about my own therapy than learning about others…. This part in particular has made me realise and face my own problems and I have benefited from that. I think that different aspects of the course have done that for different group members.

Student Reflection
My painting is a self portrait of me writing. My hair is covering my face, this is to illustrate that when I initially pick up the pen, I am hiding from something; I am not in tune with myself. From the page I am writing on emerges my reflection; the idea that my identity is revealed to me as I write”

Conclusion
This study revealed that through creativity, reflection and group sharing, students became more aware of alternative perspectives and also became more aware of their emotional selves to the degree for some, of being personally therapeutic. Values and beliefs were shared and challenged. Such attitudinal development has been termed ‘transformative learning’ i.e. the reflective transformation of beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions. Increased understanding of the doctor’s self and of other people could lead to better establishment of the therapeutic alliance in consultations and better self-care for doctors. Further research is necessary to establish any clinical benefits from taking part in such an educational venture.