

"Literature and Medicine" is devoted to the literature and history of bioethics and medical humanities. Poetry, short stories, and short descriptions of important episodes are welcome. Please send submissions to Catherine Belling at cbelling@notes.cc.sunysb.edu.

In the second of our columns focusing on literary and humanities publications produced in medical schools, editor Katie Watson explains how one program conceptualized its new publication—*ATRIUM*, the Report of the Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program of Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University, Chicago, IL. *ATRIUM* Web site: www.medschool.northwestern.edu/mhb/atrium

An Open Letter to Trees: Why More of You Must Die

Katie Watson

I wish I could say that we were drafted to launch *ATRIUM*. Like the archetype of the reluctant politician, I'd love to tell you we saw an intolerable gap in the literature that only we could fill, and after being besieged with requests that our modest refusals couldn't put off, we courageously rose to the occasion. The truth is that *ATRIUM* began when my colleague Kathryn Montgomery decided it might be nice if we published something.

Why? The desire for publicity is a spark—and as participants in a medical humanities and bioethics program that's been around for 25 years, we'd like people to know we do good work—but the fuel is joy in intellectual engagement. It's an underappreciated criterion for academic pursuits, but we thought creating a publication sounded like fun.

What we publish has to be something that justifies killing trees. What do we actually want to read? Not a who-got-what-grant newsletter, and certainly not another journal to add to the stack of scholarly peer-reviewed journals on our desks. Most medical humanities publications are primarily literary journals, so that angle seemed well covered. We're fans of the *Hastings Center Report* for bioethics and wondered what the analog was for medical humanities. Ah, a "report."

We wanted to read the kind of ideas that get us excited enough to wave bananas around at lunch, to see the kind of art that propels you out of your chair to share it with a colleague down the hall. It's uncommon to combine bioethics and the medical humanities, both programmatically and in print, and we didn't feel that any one publication reflected the way we think and teach at Northwestern.

Because we're in a multidisciplinary field that engages with topics of public concern, I wanted *ATRIUM* to be accessible to a broad audience. As a lawyer teaching in a medical school, I have the goal of translation—not dumbing down the law, but making it accessible to thoughtful professionals outside my field. A multidisciplinary field requires sophisticated yet comprehensible conversation across disciplines, the precursor to a truly interdisciplinary product. So I'd like the *ATRIUM* writing style to be in the same family as that found in magazines like *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic*.

The next decision was to build each issue around a theme. Themes can make the sum larger than the parts (a good thing for a short publication) and create a feeling that authors are engaged in something of a shared conversation. So we begin with provocative themes in cultural studies that we hope will inspire writers, I invite our amazing faculty to pitch ideas, and then I look for a range of pieces that will apply that theme across curricular, clinical, and community contexts.

Before I agreed to the task of editing, I asked for a process that would situate the production of *ATRIUM* midway between dictatorship and death by committee. Final decisions are mine, but they almost always begin by brainstorming with my colleagues, who give me tremendous guidance and support. For us this approach captures the best of the collaborative environment that fosters creativity, and the leadership that gets things done. I'm also fortunate to be collaborating with an outstanding graphic designer, Kathleen Evans of Anonymous Designs.

ATRIUM has an unusual production schedule: about every three seasons. Some might be irritated by that asymmetry, but we decided we'd rather spend our budget making each issue beautiful than on generating a larger number of less interesting issues, and as editor I'd rather have it be a labor of love than a recurring burden.

So you put out your first issue and hold your breath . . . and in this case, let it out after receiving many kind e-mail messages from both friends and strangers. The only negative feedback I

received after the first two issues was from a few people who found the cover art disturbing. That gave me pause, but the art in *ATRIUM* isn't window-dressing; it's part of the conversation. Each piece raises a thematic question and is connected to Northwestern in some way. I haven't set out to use confrontational images, but I'm not opposed to them either. What I am opposed to is "hotel art," the pleasant watercolor of an elderly couple getting their blood pressure checked that doesn't make me feel anything at all. The common portrayal of the medical humanities as sentimental and comforting is incomplete; as a whole, our field is at its most vital when it's challenging, insightful, and revelatory. *Aesthetic* doesn't mean beautiful, it's just the opposite of anesthetic.

I think of each issue of *ATRIUM* as an installment in a larger experiment. The change in Issue 3 was soliciting some non-Northwestern authors, and in Issue 4 I'll open the process to unsolicited submissions. I confess I'm nervous about that step. What if I don't get any or if I get way too many? How will that complicate assembling each issue's puzzle? But I look forward to the challenge of trying to make each issue better than the last.

There's a sense in which it's ludicrous to be writing all this about a publication that has put out three issues; the thought of people reading this column and thinking, "Atri-what?" is making me laugh as I type. But in the spirit of collaboration with those who might contemplate launching new publications in the future, this is an honest recitation of the aspirations that created our report and the goals we have for its continuation. I'm eager to see how they change over time and which of them we can meet.

Katie Watson is a lecturer in the Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program of Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, IL.

