

HONORING THE Sacred Garment

Eric Laywell, PhD
Department of Biomedical Sciences

These words, by American dancer and choreographer, Martha Graham, have always resonated with me. And you

may remember seeing them before, as I always include them on the final slide of the First Patient presentation immediately before the incoming medical students go down to the anatomy lab to meet their cadavers. They express a near-universal understanding that the human body, while a material thing, is different from all other material things. Different in degree, it is true; but also different in kind. There is, literally, nothing else like it.

Some among us would say that this is because we each reflect the divine spark of our creator. That is, in the words of Benedict the XVIth, “Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed. Each of us is loved. Each of us is necessary.”

Others would say that what sets us apart—what makes us unique from all other animals—is our natural capacity for rational thought. These two ideas are surely not mutually exclusive, and they both help to explain our deep and mysterious reverence for the human body, even when that body has ceased to function as a self-integrating organism: that is, when it dies.

The passage of Time barely reduces this innate need to respect and honor human remains, as can be seen by the great pains that we take not to disturb the ancient burial sites of people who lived hundreds or even thousands of years before us. It is not until the recognizable human substance becomes indistinguishable from Earth that we finally say they are gone.

By the work of Fire, the people before us this evening—your “first patients”—have been reduced to ash. Soon, these ashes will

“The body is a sacred garment. It’s your first and last garment; it is what you enter life in and what you depart life with, and it should be treated with honor.”

be scattered, and they will become Earth once more.

It was their hope that they could teach

you valuable lessons, and that you would carry those lessons with you as you practice medicine. Some of you will share the story of those lessons this evening. And some of you will carry those lessons silently in your hearts. But there is no doubt that those lessons will shape and guide you as you make a difference in the lives of your future patients.

I know this is true, because even I am surprised by the things that I learn from these body donors. Even I am sometimes taken aback by the things that I see, and the feelings that are evoked when studying their bodies.

As most of you know, the prosection demonstrations this year were substantially different from prior years. I had the opportunity to work through some of the new approaches over the spring, since we had an extra cadaver. I wasn’t sure that all of the new demonstrations that I had in mind were feasible, and I wanted to work out any bugs before asking your teaching assistants to spend their time on it. It had been quite a long time since I last had the chance to do my very own dissections; I’m usually too busy fixing all the things that you do in the lab.

In any case, I was working on a shoulder dissection of an elderly man whose occupation had been some type of manual laborer. His muscles were large and looked powerful, especially given his advanced age.

Anna Hayward is a first year medical student from Saint Augustine, Florida. Her passions are art, traveling, and of course, her best friend Kitty.

As I approached the shoulder joint and began trying to open the joint capsule, it just didn't want to cooperate. There seemed to be lots of adhesions and scar tissue, and it was very slow going. Eventually, I managed to open things up, and was rewarded with a view of the most arthritic joint I have ever seen.

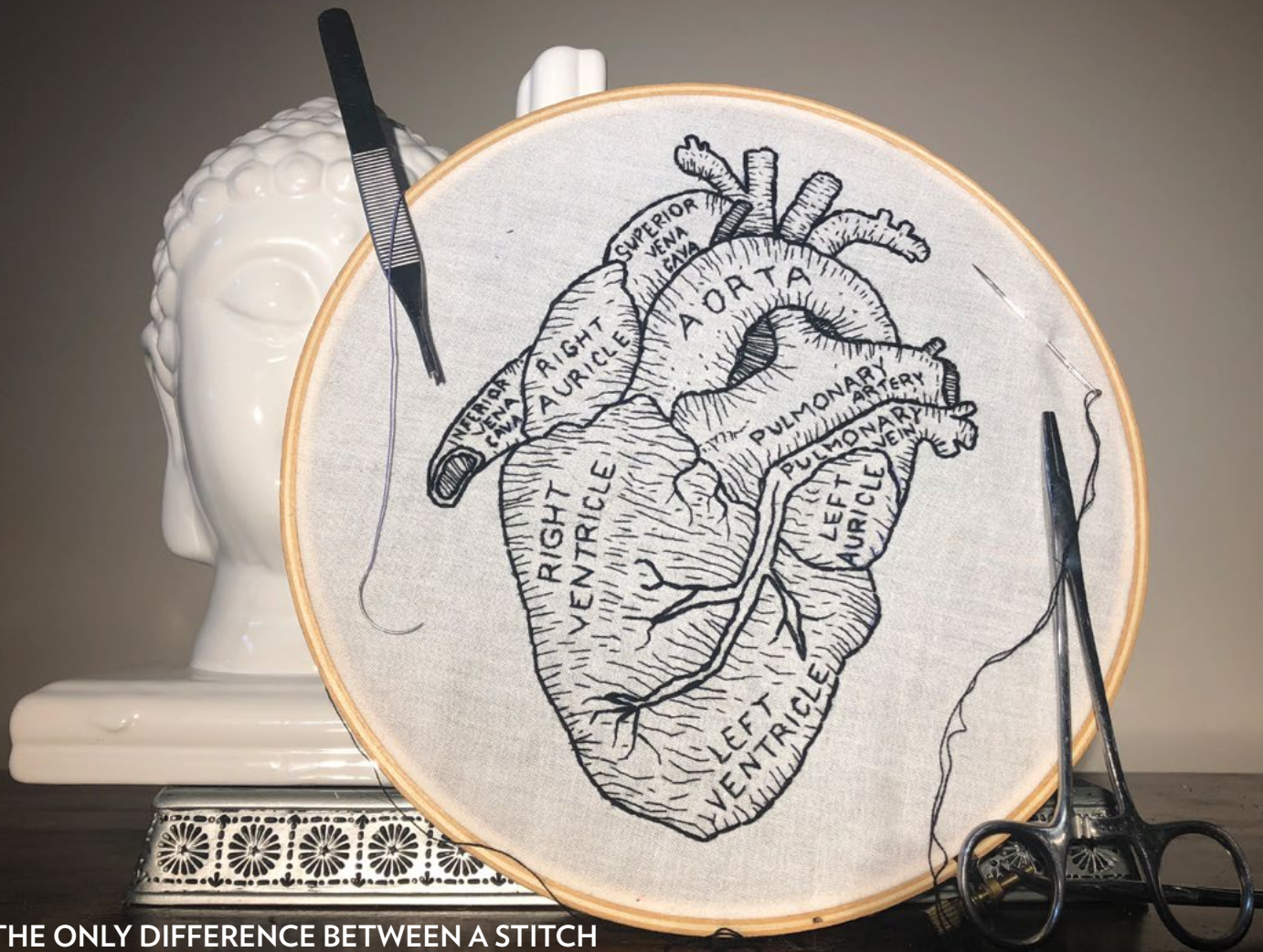
The humeral head was misshapen and very deeply pitted, and it seemed far too small given the man's overall size.

And then I had a brief but significant moment of clarity. Maybe it was because I was alone with only my thoughts in the prosection room, but the anatomy and pathophysiology of that shoulder came together in a way that was very real. And I felt a profound, visceral sympathy for this man and the pain that he must have experienced every time he moved his arm. I was, in short, changed. I can tell you: at my age, that is not something that happens very often.

This past summer you and I had an amazing and rare opportunity to study the human body in a deep and meaningful way. For most of you, this opportunity will not come again. Tonight I join you in honoring and thanking those who lent us their sacred garment so that we might learn and be changed. ■

The above is an excerpt from an address given at the Body Donor Memorial hosted by the Florida State University College of Medicine Class of 2022.

Dr. Laywell is an Associate Professor in the Department of Biomedical Sciences at Florida State University College of Medicine.



**THE ONLY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A STITCH
AND A SUTURE IS COTTON VS VICRYL**

Anna Hayward, Class of 2022