



## How to take a vacation

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**P**ersonal self-care is an important strategy for every physician. On one recent vacation, thoughts of the challenges facing my patients intruded despite all of my attempts to “escape.” I reflected that perhaps even the most comprehensive medical education cannot fully impart the means to clear the lingering images of suffering patients from our minds. When the skill of empathy is taught to medical students, it is contrasted with sympathy. We teach that empathy allows us to maintain a distance that ultimately facilitates the therapeutic agenda. Yet even an experienced physician skilled in this principle might falter while walking on a beach at dawn and far from home.

### Away time

This summer

I've traveled miles

Plane bus ferry and car

Away time

A physician's

(Merited) absence

Walk with me along this beach

Ocean tide soon to be high

(It says so on a sign where stones  
give way to sand)

Will elide my footprints

So vigorously planted

I'll return with the dawn

To press my soles and toes

Into the grains again

But what of those souls I've left behind

(Or who have left me?)

Thoughts

Ebbing and flowing

Considering not my own

Footprints of my patients on the planet

So briefly outlined

Invariably each will fill

Effaced

In the relentless push/pull of the tide

In a passing storm

Disease lapping at the bulwark

I've never known one patient

Willingly washed away

Except when finally swept away

Seeking peace

I haven't left them behind

Weeks leading to this vacation no  
different

Each limned in my mind

To punctuate my leave-taking

This one

Another

Then another so many

Diagnoses

Since humanity's beginning

Innumerable

As the particles at my feet

Or the tears they have/I shed

This morning

I behold an ocean of salt tears

What do patients think

We think about

Away time

Is never truly away

Shell to my ear

Susurrations of the sea

Hear their voices in the sibilance

*Sh ... sh ... sh ...*

Time makes

Supplicants of us all

Please

Allow us to stay

A little longer

Waves pounding crashing

A particular wind in that sound

Is there mockery in that

Assertive roar

Our sophistication

Transient/lost

No match for

What endures beneath

Archaea

I'm not the first poet

Nor will be the last

Here

Expounding/expanding on this

Existential theme

What I realize

(And our patients will never know)

What they don't teach in medical

school

Is

How to really take a vacation

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#### Competing interests

None declared