



# Hearing the unspoken

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In palliative care, much of what we aim to teach our learners is grounded in what medical culture has traditionally viewed as soft skills. This can include developing rapport quickly in high-stress situations, reading nonverbal body language, being comfortable with silence, and adapting communication to meet a patient's needs. In this poem I explore a teaching moment, which occurred during a patient interview where a trainee missed a nonverbal cue. The patient described within is theoretical.

### The pause

You paused and the resident barrelled ahead  
no doubt focused intently on their internal, infernal checklist  
which, to be fair, mutates every few weeks  
(and on a daily basis amidst picky attendings  
a club to which I sometimes shamefully belong).

You paused  
and in that moment, something invisible slipped away  
now far downstream, and out of reach  
so intent they were on measuring your symptoms  
locating, categorizing, and storing data  
instead of pausing to admire your soft and quiet tenacity.

You paused, and in that moment,  
were cut down and measured against a yardstick of disease  
instead of the fuchsia-streaked sunrises that bring you joy  
your grandchild's berry-stained fingers and  
the first-hand fear slumbering deep within your bones  
a now solemn bedmate of those pesky cancer cells which dance nightly in your sleep  
now eternally entwined.

You paused and I saw it  
I saw you.

And not for the first time I despaired  
for how do we teach the magic  
contained within a pause  
when we have failed to teach our students  
to see each other as human?

**Dr Hollis Roth** is a palliative care physician and writer in Lethbridge, Alta.

#### Competing interests

**Dr Hollis Roth** receives compensation for teaching Learning Essential Approaches to Palliative Care at Pallium Canada in Ottawa, Ont. **Dr Roth** has worked on a pilot project in a palliative care and heart function clinic at Chinook Regional Hospital in Lethbridge, Alta, which has received funding from Boehringer Ingelheim. She also sits on the Medical Advisory Board of Oneday Dreams, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to fulfilling end-of-life wishes for terminally ill adults in Canada.

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