

Gaudeamus Igitur at 40—A Tribute and Assessment

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April 2023 marked 40 years since cardiologist John Stone published his poem *Gaudeamus Igitur*¹ in *JAMA*, urging readers to find joy in the practice of medicine (Box). The poem's message remains as essential today as it was decades ago. Stone, a prolific writer known for editing the book *On Doctoring: Stories, Poems, Essays*,² wrote the poem as a graduation address for the newly minted physicians at the Emory School of Medicine in 1982.^{1,3} He said he wrote poetry because "It is one way of making sense out of the world, and...it has the power to heal."^{4,5}

A friend from medical school sent us the poem early in our intern years. Stone's words felt like a guiding force: we could relate to many of the couplets already and we carried the remaining lines with us, wisdom at the ready to call on in times of need. Urgent lines such as "For the patient's story will come to you/like hunger, like thirst" are filled with a passion for the practice of medicine that reminded us of our purpose: caring for patients and being trusted keepers of their stories.

The poem, whose Latin title translates to "Therefore, let us rejoice," had a venerated history before Stone adapted it for Emory's graduates. Its earliest known iteration was found in Paris in a 13th-century book of repentant hymns, and, in keeping with that tradition, Stone's version incorporates religious themes and intimately speaks to the ways doctoring can be both moving and mystifying. At the same time, its tone remains light, echoing the voices that sang *Gaudeamus Igitur* when it evolved into a medieval drinking song,^{1,6,7} which was adopted by university students by the 18th century across Europe with the lyrics changed to reflect the unique experience and, at times, absurdity, of academic life. The music was later incorporated by Johannes Brahms as a theme in the boisterous conclusion to his *Akademische Festouvertüre* (Academic Festival Overture), written as an expression of thanks to the University of Breslau for granting him an honorary degree in 1880,⁷⁻⁹ which Stone acknowledges alongside reference to 18th-century English poet Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno*, a poem written in the call and response form of ancient Hebrew antiphonal poetry (which Stone reprises) in which Smart imagines the ordinary activities of his cat as form of worship² ("For today in the breathing name of Brahms/and the cat of Christopher Smart/... is a commencing"). *Gaudeamus Igitur* continues to be a traditional commencement song that celebrates the promise of youth and reminds graduates that life is fleeting.^{1,6,7}

Stone couples his refrain of conjunctions (eg, "For this is the end of examinations/For this is the beginning of testing/For Death will give the final examination/and everyone will pass") with the use of second-person narration to make the

reader feel as though he is speaking to them directly and is taking them somewhere purposeful. Stone uses these conjunctions to string together a series of relatable, perhaps universal, experiences that build throughout the piece.

Lines loaded with love and goodness, such as "For their breath is our breathing and our reason" and "For what matters finally is how the human spirit is spent," could each be a mantra for what it means to be a doctor. Strung together, Stone has crafted a moving manifesto—a declaration of intentions, motives, or views. The entirety of the poem is a physician's purpose.

The poem explores the uncertainty inherent in the practice of medicine through observations about placebo, mortality, and the discomfort that results from being expected to be wise, invincible, and superhuman while caring for patients. Although it does not use the term *imposter*, it validates these feelings as part of being a physician: "For you will look smart and feel ignorant/and the patient will not know which day it is for you."

Stone's use of the simple future tense—will run, will lead, will drop—gives him the narrative authority to claim what will come. In one simple line, "for there will be computers," he predicts the profound impact of the electronic medical record. By threading the theme of time throughout the poem, Stone offers us constancy he transforms into wisdom, with omniscient lines such as "For the sun is always right on time." He is indeed an old soul, asserting himself as the kind of guiding force any reader would want in their company.

Most lines are composed of iambic feet (a unit in poetry comprising an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable), which propels the poem forward in a steady rhythm just as Stone reminds us of how "the days will run together in gallops and the years/go by as fast as the speed of thought." Days become units to demarcate knowledge—"For this is the day you know too little/against the day when you will know too much"—or to define mood—"For whole days will move in the direction of rain."

Stone tells us that "everyone comes to the arts too late," but even so, narrative competence can still be developed—"For you can be trained to listen only for the oboe/out of the whole orchestra"—more than a decade before narrative medicine was defined in the medical literature. Stone takes care to highlight the joy in the practice of medicine. He assures us, "you will walk triumphantly/in purest joy/and say Yes to all the dark corners/where no one is listening." If we have not yet experienced "elevators of elation," Stone's use of the authoritative simple future tense assures us we will.

We have taught this poem annually for more than a decade in an optional humanities elective offered to fourth-

Box. *Gaudeamus Igitur*, by John Stone

For this is the day of joy
 which has been fourteen hundred and sixty days in coming
 and fourteen hundred and fifty-nine nights
 For today in the breathing name of Brahms
 and the cat of Christopher Smart
 through the unbroken line of language and all the nouns
 stored in the angular gyrus
 today is a commencing
 For this is the day you know too little
 against the day when you will know too much
 For you will be invincible
 and vulnerable in the same breath
 which is the breath of your patients
 For their breath is our breathing and our reason
 For the patient will know the answer
 and you will ask him
 ask her
 For the family may know the answer
 For there may be no answer
 and you will know too little again
 or there *will* be an answer and you will know too much
 forever
 For you will look smart and feel ignorant
 and the patient will not know which day it is for you
 and you will pretend to be smart out of ignorance
 For you must fear ignorance more than cyanosis
 For whole days will move in the direction of rain
 For you will cry and there will be no one to talk to
 or no one but yourself
 For you will be lonely
 For you will be alone
 For there is a difference
 For there is no seriousness like joy
 For there is no joy like seriousness
 For the days will run together in gallops and the years
 go by as fast as the speed of thought
 which is faster than the speed of light
 or Superman
 or Superwoman
 For you will not be Superman
 For you will not be Superwoman
 For you will not be Solomon
 but you will be asked the question nevertheless^a
 For after you learn what to do, how and when to do it
 the question will be *whether*
 For there will be addictions: whiskey, tobacco, love
 For they will be difficult to cure
 For you yourself will pass the kidney stone of pain
 and be joyful
 For this is the end of examinations
 For this is the beginning of testing
 For Death will give the final examination
 and everyone will pass
 For the sun is always right on time
 and even that may be reason for a kind of joy
 For there are all kinds of
 all degrees of joy
 For love is the highest joy
 For which reason the best hospital is a house of joy
 even with rooms of pain and loss
 exits of misunderstanding
 For there is the mortar of faith
 For it helps to believe
 For Mozart can heal and no one knows where he is buried
 For penicillin can heal
 and the word
 and the knife

^a 1 Kings (Melachim) 3:16-27.Originally Published April 1, 1983 | *JAMA*. 1983;249(13):1741-1742.

For the placebo will work and you will think you know why
 For the placebo will have side effects and you will know
 you do not know why
 For none of these may heal
 For joy is nothing if not mysterious
 For your patients will test you for spleen
 and for the four humors
 For they will know the answer
 For they have the disease
 For disease will peer up over the hedge
 of health, with only its eyes showing
 For the T waves will be peaked and you will not know why
 For there will be computers
 For there will be hard data and they will be hard
 to understand
 For the trivial will trap you and the important escape you
 For the Committee will be unable to resolve the question
 For there will be the arts
 and some will call them
 soft data
 whereas in fact they are the hard data
 by which our lives are lived
 For everyone comes to the arts too late
 For you can be trained to listen only for the oboe
 out of the whole orchestra
 For you may need to strain to hear the voice of the patient
 in the thin reed of his crying
 For you will learn to see most acutely out of
 the corner of your eye
 to hear best with your inner ear
 For there are late signs and early signs
 For the patient's story will come to you
 like hunger, like thirst
 For you will know the answer
 like second nature, like first
 For the patient will live
 and you will try to understand
 For you will be amazed
 or the patient will not live
 and you will try to understand
 For you will be baffled
 For you will try to explain both, either, to the family
 For there will be laying on of hands
 and the letting go
 For love is what death would always intend if it had the
 choice
 For the fever will drop, the bone remold along its lines of force
 the speech return
 the mind remember itself
 For there will be days of joy
 For there will be elevators of elation
 and you will walk triumphantly
 in purest joy
 along the halls of the hospital
 and say *Yes* to all the dark corners
 where no one is listening
 For the heart will lead
 For the head will explain
 but the final common pathway is the heart
 whatever kingdom may come
 For what matters finally is how the human spirit is spent
 For this is the day of joy
 For this is the morning to rejoice
 For this is the beginning
 Therefore, let us rejoice
Gaudeamus igitur.

year medical students at the Medical College of Wisconsin. Between 6 and 16 students participate in the elective; our 1.5-hour session is a component of a month-long series of seminars in the course. We begin the session with a collective group reading of the poem, in which we ask each student to read a couplet in turn. As the reading proceeds through each new voice, the poem's language, cadence, and themes unify the group. Each year, after the collective reading of the poem, there is always silence.

We ask each student to choose a section of the poem they find especially meaningful. The ensuing discussion brings the group together: students identify with the words and experiences of the poet and of each other, fostering a culture of support and shared humanity that is both healthy and healing. Each year, the conversation is still lively, always fresh, and never the same. We close the session by asking students to compose their own brief manifesto they would want to keep in their white coat pocket during intern year, reminding them of their purpose.

Through being part of the call and response of Stone's poem, we each become more heightened to our calling. We always complete the reflection exercise with our students, and we have found a different couplet speaks to us each time, chronicling our own personal and professional evolution as physicians. In the final lines, Stone transforms the infinite future into the here and now: "For this is the day of joy...this is the beginning." The future he prescribed for us 40 years ago is here: despite the many contemporary challenges in health care, there is hope and joy today. Ultimately, the poem culminates with the only period present in the entire piece, landing just as Stone steers us masterfully to our destination: these are the reasons to rejoice.

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Additional Information: Some references appear as embedded hyperlinks in the online version of this article.

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