

Poetic Angel: NAPT Keynote Speaker Dr. Rafael Campo

By Jerri Chaplin

Driving to Boston's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center on an unusually cold October morning, I had to wonder if Dr. Rafael Campo's parents had been psychic. How did they know to give their newborn a name that means "healer"?

Over tea in a hospital cafe, the physician-poet responded, "Somehow, my Mom knew what my life path would be. Something always suggested my life's work to her. She just sent me what she calls one of her 'treasures'—sort of like a mass card, saying things about the angel Rafael, Saint Rafael. And, in fact, it is the name of both my father and grandfather." Dr. Campo included poems about both men in his first book, *The Other Man Was Me* (1994), winner of the National Poetry Series Award. He went on to receive a John S. Guggenheim Fellowship (1997-98) and to write several books including *What The Body Told* (1996) and *The Desire to Heal: A Doctor's Education in Empathy, Identity and Desire* (1998), both Lambda Literary Award winners; *Diva* (1999); and the recent *Landscape With Human Figure* (2002).

“My parents read poetry to me early on. The poet was who I was in my heart,” Dr. Campo said. Clearly, Mrs. Campo knew her son’s healing destiny long before he did. Part of the enormous appeal of his poetry is that it chronicles an almost mythic journey—that of a sensitive boy who lived many years in deep denial: denial of his love of poetry, denial of his homosexuality and of his cultural heritage. The unflinching *The Desire To Heal* tells the story unabashedly and in depth. It is this story he will be sharing with us as keynote poet Saturday, April 5 at our annual conference in Miami. This Cuban-American can well address our theme, "Diving Into Language: A Multicultural Journey in Poetic Healing" and will present a workshop in addition to his lunch-time speech.

Reflecting back on early days, Dr. Campo said, “As much as I was drawn to poetry, I rejected it. To love poetry, I thought, was to be a sissy. If I loved poetry, then I was gay, poetry marked me as gay.” Dr. Campo admitted that to acknowledge his love of poetry and his attraction to males was just not something he could do in his youth. “Instead, I turned to rigorous science. Science was sure, it was facts, it was ‘clean.’ And I was convinced that putting on a white coat would make me whiter.”

He began studies at Harvard Medical School. "The first two years are pre-clinical, you spend little time on the psychosocial. You study biology, pharmacology, all the 'ologies. Poetry was certainly frowned upon by all my mentors. The medical process tends to steer healers away from the expressive arts therapies. You are dealing with a biomedical model and poetry is thought of as a threat to data and clinical facts."

Still, Dr. Campo read poetry as he lived his life: in the closet. "I had to read poetry because it kept my empathetic core alive," he said. Dr. Campo came to feel mechanized, saying, "I was a technician without a humane dimension." Dr. Campo told me that when you begin to work in hospital wards, "You are thrown into people's suffering. Your skills are not matched to your practical work. Your textbook learning is limited, limits you. Seeing my patients, their dignity, trying to tell their stories, I said to myself, "I need to figure out how to hear their narratives and connect empathically.'" Finally, between his third and fourth years in medical school, he took time off to reconnect with the inner poet. "I enrolled at Boston University to study poetry. To do this, I had to withdraw from Harvard. It wasn't that they wouldn't keep my place but they feared I wouldn't return to medical school and the rule was I had to say I was withdrawing."

How did his parents feel about his leaving Harvard? "My parents had always nurtured me as an artist," he said, "but they had had the immigrant experience and wanted me to have a successful career, to make money. I think at this point they feared I would wind up making sandals in Sausalito."

What he wound up with was an MA in Poetics from Boston University. "Many of the poems in my first book were born of that year at BU. My time at BU made me feel reconnected to my desire to heal," Dr. Campo said.

The study of Poetics is reflected in his poetry. He often uses classic forms such as the sestina, sonnet, rhymed couplet and pantoum. His subject matter ranges from the high of love to the desperation of disease, from the inner workings of his own heart to the physicality of a patient's heart. His work is informed by being a Cuban-American, gay, a son, grandson, lover and physician. His life may at times be filled with urgency and emergency but his poems can be serene and soothing as a salve, catharsis in the midst of medical or emotional crisis.

As a resident at San Francisco General Hospital, Dr. Campo felt isolated. "When I began to work with patients from diverse points of origin and identities, I realized I was shutting myself off from them. I wasn't giving fully of myself.

HIV/AIDS was on the rise." He disconnected from his gayness, telling himself, "I am not like them," as he saw gay man after gay man admitted to the hospital. "Nineteen out of 20 of my patients were men my own age with AIDS," he remembers. "My patients re-taught me that I could not remove myself from empathy. Their dignity, their elegance, how they bore their suffering! To refuse their humanity was to refuse my own. They were able to hang onto the core essence of what it means to be human despite rejection by their families, despite all their pain. It was moving to be present with them."

His first book, written in medical school, was now published. How did he feel about that book being launched? "I felt shame," Dr. Campo said. "I thought, 'Now everyone will know.' I was marked more visibly as a poet even as I worked to become a humane healer."

Dr. Campo's journey has taken him a long way from that lonely time in San Francisco. In Boston, he has a busy, diverse practice as a general internist. He sees patients with cancer, HIV, chronic fatigue, chronic pain and many other conditions. When a patient has been diagnosed, Dr. Campo may give him or her a packet of educational information with a few poems tucked in. "They come back for the next visit and want to talk only about the poems, not the educational

materials,” he laughed. He invites patients to journal, to write him poems or to write him a letter about how their visit went. He often asks patients what they like to read and finds that patients will spontaneously bring in poems they have written. “People do have their favorite poems. One of my patients was very comforted by a Dickinson poem that was an anchor for her, a way to feel peace and to create a relationship with herself,” he said.

Listen to what one patient, a 49-year-old man with AIDS, had to say: “The doctor helped me find a voice. He was a role model and a confidante. I knew I had to get a life; otherwise I would be dead like many of my friends.” This man started writing constantly—poems, short stories, novels. He even created his own web site.

Certain doctors refer patients to Dr. Campo but many are still dismissive of the use of language for healing. “Some have a mistrust of something which is equally as powerful as their traditional ways. They see the wisdom and knowledge of poetry as something threatening or they see it as incidental, new agey or touchy-feely. They become defensive. And yes, some patients, too, will say 'This isn't for me,'" he said.

But most patients are deeply interested. The message of this doctor-patient interaction, Dr. Campo said, is “I want to engage you as another human being, to hear you, to listen, to make a deep, deep connection.”

For every doctor who may not understand Dr. Campo’s poetic passion, there is a poet who does. Here is what some poets and literary critics have to say:

Rafael Campo is an accomplished formalist. I hugely enjoy watching him skitter from sestina to pantoum, sonnet to rhymed couplet, to say nothing of his own nonce forms devised as the situation suggests.

—Maxine Kumin

...his poems inhabit the landscape of birth and dying, sorrow and sex, shame and brave human persistence—first and last things, center stage in large-hearted, open, deeply-felt poems.

—Mark Doty

...he contemplates a world that encompasses Cuban politics, brown skin in a white world, the fierceness of oysters, the dreams of dogs, loving a man and the desperation of patients' diarrhea.

—Richard Labonte, *The Front Page*

Dr. Campo said that he uses poetry as much as medicine. There sometimes comes the point where a poem will do more good than a potion. "The poem can be a healing interaction with a dying person. People breathe a bit easier with the rhythm," he said.

In addition to his Boston practice, Dr. Campo is an associate professor of medicine at his alma mater, Harvard Medical School, and visiting writer at Brandeis University. He travels often to speak and teach, and, of course, writes poetry when he can. He has the support of his colleagues and his partner of 18 years, a retinal surgeon.

When Dr. Campo leaves us after his conference appearance in April, we can take comfort in knowing he has a new book due out in August 2003, *The Healing Art: A Doctor's Black Bag of Poetry*. In addition to poetry, it includes

patient narratives. It is a mini-anthology showing how poets experience illness and how Dr. Campo uses poems in his practice.

The Pocket Guide to Angels, published by London's National Gallery, says the archangel Rafael is the "angel most forgotten," trailing Gabriel and Michael. Rafael Campo is not an angel but the most human and humane of men and once you hear him speak, you will never forget him.