



Wet dust

Peter Daniel

The author (AQA, Medical College of Georgia, 2013) is a member of the Class of 2014 at the Medical College of Georgia of Georgia Regents University in Augusta, Georgia. This essay won honorable mention in the 2013 Helen H. Glaser Student Essay Competition.

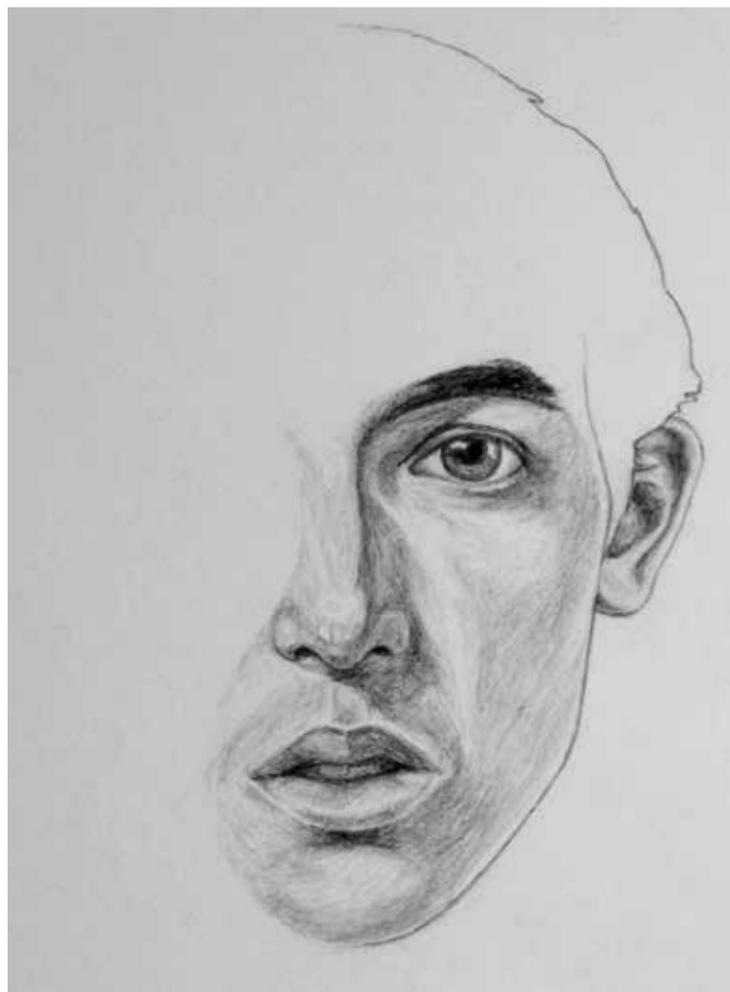
When you find something in a human face that calls out to you, not just for help but in some sense for yourself, how far do you go in answering that call, how far can you go, seeing that you have your own life to get on with as much as he has his?

—Frederick Buechner^{1p27}

Buechner's question haunts and impels me. It led me to live in rural Haiti before guiding me to medical school, and it continues to inform my decisions each

day. How much is enough? How much of my time, energy, resources, and voice is enough? I'll admit I don't know the answer, but I intend to respond. I would like to participate in the tension and potential framed by the question, which brings us to faces—words come alive when punctuated with person.

I remember many faces. The first that come to mind are those I've drawn. As a visual artist, I felt a transition approaching when I moved to Bayonnais, Haiti, but I wasn't sure how it would look. Faces of my new Haitian community inspired me, and my acrylic abstractions gave way to representational graphite portraits. Because I prefer not to work from photographs, each person would sit for one to two hours in exchange for a protein shake and the undivided attention of the resident *blan*, Creole for "foreigner." The children enjoyed it so much that I made a waiting list, which



Peter Daniel.

was good for my artistic discipline. These drawings were very challenging, and the models would often become fatigued as I was completing half the face. I found these “half portraits” intriguing, both in composition and meaning. I started calling them the “Incomplete Series” because something in each work suggested that we need community to see ourselves whole; as Chaim Potok’s character, Asher Lev, would say, “I did not know. But I sensed it as truth.”^{2p324}

Truth can be hard to receive. Conventions, or stereotypes if you will, are what render faces difficult, for the greatest challenge in art is seeing the subject. The first day of art class in Haiti, I asked my students what they wanted to learn. Their response: “To draw things as they look.” The lesson is actually quite simple, though it may take a lifetime to master. All you must do is learn to see light (which as a budding ophthalmologist makes me smile) but to do so you must let go of your conventional ways of seeing. If I ask you to draw my portrait, you may find some predetermined shapes in your mind competing with what is actually there. I may observe you focusing more on your paper than me, and in the final product, your bias toward symmetry may cause you to have missed the fact that my left and right eyes do not look the same: the line

above my right eye hangs lower than that above my left. As in art so in life—and in medicine. You can focus more on a document than a patient, perhaps allowing conventions and stereotypes to dictate “how things look” to you more than the person in front of you. Before you know it, you’ve unwittingly missed the pertinent diagnosis, just as you missed my eyes. Claude Monet once said that “he wished he had been born blind and then had suddenly gained his sight so that he could have begun to paint . . . without knowing what the objects were that he saw before him.”^{3p1} He wanted a *tabula rasa* void of associations; he wanted to truly see light and how it touches form. Our art, both visual and medical, will be limited if we are not willing to use truth instead of conventions.

Monet’s comment reminds me of the small dark eyes of my future godson as they opened for the first time. In a mud hut room filled with too many people, I assisted the delivery of Ti-helas, who had barely survived his mother’s weakness. I saw poverty framed in his face, a connecting of the dots between his father’s financial insecurity, his mother’s malnutrition, and the seemingly eternal five minutes during which she was too weak to push. An experienced midwife shared a guarded prognosis as family and friends nearly prayed the tin roof off the house. A few years later in that same room, I listened to the story of his mother’s death during the cholera epidemic. I remember the dimly lit face of his grandmother in the corner of the room, tears shining in the light of a kerosene lamp. Looking through projector flare into the eyes of

my first-year medical school colleagues, I shared the story one morning between lectures; the family photograph behind me brought cholera home more effectively than a GM1 ganglioside.

I remember the faces of two eight-year-old boys who asked me for food one evening. I could tell they were genuinely hungry, as they hadn’t eaten since the previous day. But I had learned to say no; I had a finite supply of Cliff bars to conserve for “emergencies.” It is unfortunately normal not to eat for a day in Bayonnais. I hear a medical school interviewer asking me why he just put me through a rigorous ethics scenario. “It addresses the value of a human life,” I responded. “Yes, and as a physician, you will have to make difficult decisions with limited resources, and we want to know if you can handle the consequences of those decisions,” he added.

I remember the face of Isaac, one of my students, humbly asking in rehearsed French whether I could spare some food for his family, as they hadn’t eaten in three days. Yes. A couple of boxes of protein bars for a family of eight are not much, but they are something. A few weeks later he invited me to visit his house, and as we shared time together, his family

prepared their meal of the day. When Isaac offered me an equal portion, my polite refusal was met with insistence, to which I whispered, “But your family needs this.” I will never forget Isaac’s expression, for without words he said with perfect clarity, “Peter, you don’t understand how important it is that you share this meal with us.” How far do you go? How far can you go as a well-developed, well-nourished American who has already enjoyed breakfast and for whom lunch waits? That day Isaac pushed a wealthy American into poverty, and he taught me that sometimes you serve others by allowing yourself to be served.

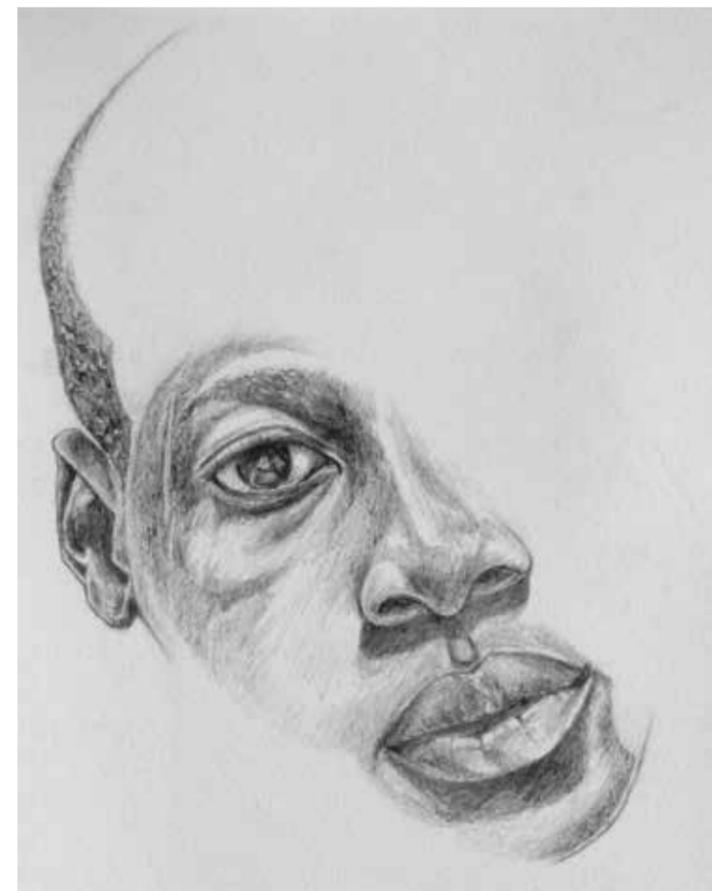
I later learned that there are limits. I visited the home of Noncilien, a student who lives an hour and a half into the mountains. In this area, people may go a week without eating more than a sweet potato or an ear of corn during the dry season. Old women may work in the field because their social security died of malaria or other illness. Four of Noncilien’s siblings had died at ages eight, nine, eleven, and twelve. When we arrived at the house, his mother had prepared a meal, which I received graciously—and artfully, for there is an art to how far you go, how much you eat. You honor the gift and the dignity of the host by eating, while acknowledging the hunger in the eyes of the child peeping through the window; whatever is left behind will certainly not go to waste. As I said my goodbyes, Noncilien’s mother offered me a large sack of shelled beans. Fortunately I was leaving the country the following day—permission for another polite refusal with the justification that Customs would not allow my return with agricultural products.

In Haiti, I learned to say yes to receiving from people with next to nothing, as well as no to hungry children, among many other difficult things. My friends’ generosity taught me that there are limits to how far I could go and introduced me to the art of receiving. I learned to see my subjects well, or at least better—the silent faces as well as the complexity of poverty. But of all the faces I drew, the most challenging was my own.

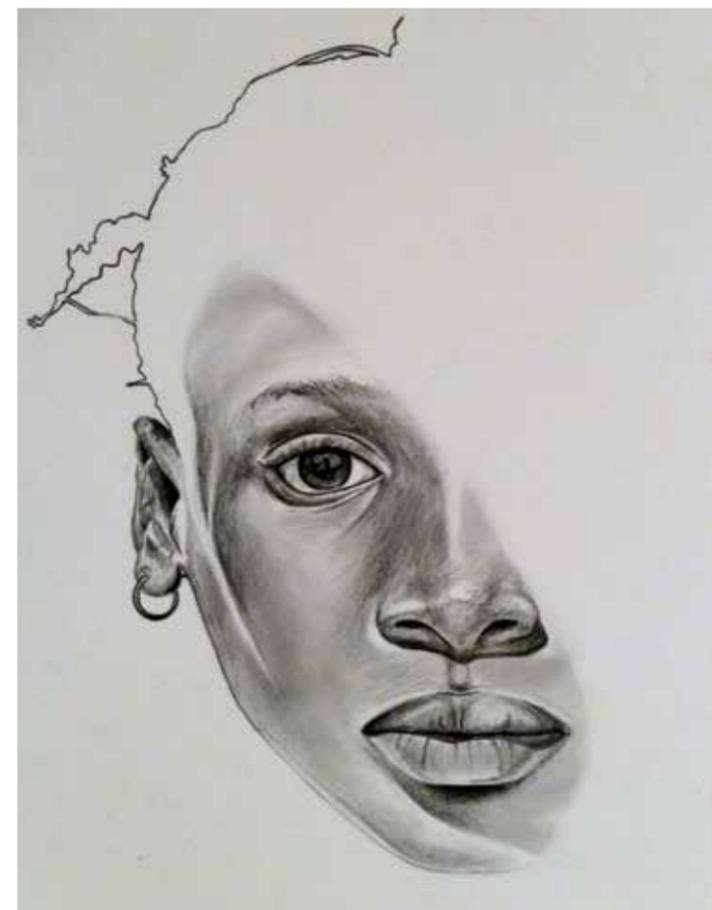
It was a showdown of sorts to stare into that mirror for two hours, trying to see something in too-familiar a human face. It provoked the question: What makes me important?

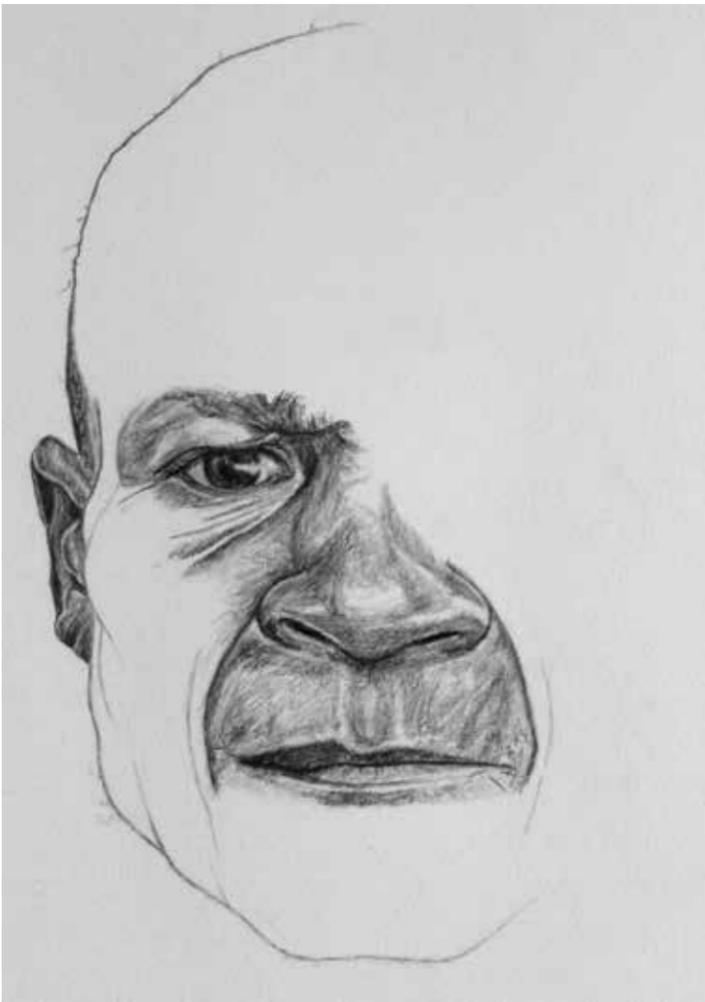
My response has been: “It is ‘relevance’^{4p27} that makes me important. Thus, I must prove my worth by accumulating accomplishments and affirmation.” That’s fine if you’re a successful people-pleasing, performance-driven perfectionist, which probably describes many medical students. But this foundation has two critical flaws: value is conditional and inherently insecure—conditional because you’re only important as long as you can earn it, insecure because your relevance depends on others being less important. According to C.S. Lewis,

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. . . . It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.^{5p122}



Above, Eslilim Jannoe. Below, Gustave Fabienne.





François Alcima and Charles Saintissile.

Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with accomplishments, affirmation, relevance, and pride in good work, but should they support the weight of our identities? If that's all we are, we can become scavengers for our egos, and often at the expense of others, including our patients. We'll travel samsāra's wheel of expectation and disappointment^{6p77} until we ground ourselves elsewhere.

Elsewhere is a place where meaning and worth are not earned but given—a place of grace. Grace is inherently unconditional, undeserved, value freely given. It can support you when accomplishments and pride cannot. Nevertheless, Flannery O'Connor rightly observed, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful."^{7p307} We like earning our worth because it gives us the illusion of control. Pride fears grace because it strips away this illusion, which I saw in my mirror, and it does so less like an old Band-Aid than that super-sticky tape used for IV lines. My self-portrait taught me about seeing my subject; it portrayed my incompleteness. I'm working on trading conventions for truth, pride for grace, because I want to go that far, and I believe the art of my life and medicine will be better for it.



Those of us who seek originality to justify our relevance, who need our names to live forever, might want to turn to Lewis for another lesson from the arts:

Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.^{5p226}

A beautiful irony: we may become most relevant when we own the truth that our worth is not earned or proven, but rather given.

Also given is the last part of Buechner's question, which concerns the lives we have "to get on with"—but who's to say for how long? My cadaver in anatomy lab offered one of my most profound lessons on not taking life for granted. Hers is another face I'll never forget. Thinking about neural circuits responsible for various muscle contractions and cognitive processes, I remember looking at her one day and thinking, "This is just something we ride around in." In her frail form I found myself to be more than my body . . . I recalled thoughts



Sylvestre Yvolene.

from my journal about Jean Jonel's baptism in a mud-brown Bayonnais river:

His coffee skin disappears in the river. We are but wet dust, "for a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."^{8pp1-2} But breath must yield to waters, that body becoming for moments an inanimate image of God: wet dust returned to the river, its density mingling with the world. These long seconds are pregnant with resurrection. It is time. It is his time. His body rises, dripping. Lungs open like sails to carry his heart along a new horizon. Inflated with a name still warm and humid, Jean Jonel is as he was not.

The Genesis narrative gives us the image of an all-powerful God bent over on His knees, responding to the "face of the ground," our wet dust that must have called out to Him in some sense for Himself. My cadaver reminded me that I am wet dust animated with the breath of life.

As with claiming grace over pride, this knowledge also has profound implications on my showing up in others' lives. Last year a thirty-two-year-old woman with acute myelogenous leukemia asked for some of my dust. Suddenly, what I had casually signed up for following a first-year medical lecture became a request not just for help, but for my self—my bone



About Peter Daniel
I grew up in Savannah, Georgia before studying visual art and French at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina. I plan to pursue ophthalmology and look forward to continued work in Haiti. For more information about my experiences in Haiti, please visit peterbdaniel.wordpress.com.
Illustrations by Peter Daniel.

marrow. I agreed. I'm simply borrowing these atoms for a time, after all.

How do we measure all of these lives, the ones we have to get on with as well as the ones we decide to help? If our eyes are open, and if we're willing to see beyond what is convenient, it's not hard to find that there are always faces calling out for help and for our selves. The faces may be those of our patients or families. I learned from Haiti and from medical school that we must make difficult decisions with limited resources and finite time. We must learn to say the difficult yes and the painful no. We must decide each day when and where to show up. I struggle with how far to go, how to help without encouraging dependence. We're going to make mistakes, but if we're grounded in grace, we'll be much more likely to offer it to ourselves and to each other. We'll live from confident peace instead of polished fear, and we'll ironically become more relevant and original than we could have otherwise hoped. By asking how much is enough? what is mine to do? we'll find that we've come further than we realize. We'll come to own a simple truth uniting our faces together, that being wet dust is indeed one of the highest callings.

References

1. Buechner F. *Now and Then*. New York: HarperCollins; 1983.
2. Potok C. *My Name Is Asher Lev*. New York: Random House; 1972.
3. House J. *Monet: Nature into Art*. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press; 1986.
4. Nouwen HJM. *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. New York: Crossroad Publishing; 1989.
5. Lewis CS. *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins; 1952.
6. Kulananda. *Principles of Buddhism*. Birmingham (UK): Windhorse; 1996.
7. O'Connor F, Fitzgerald S. *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1979.
8. *Holy Bible with the Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*. Peabody (MA): Hendrickson Publishers; 1989.

The author's e-mail address is: peterbdaniel@gmail.com.