The Compass: A New Mayo Clinic Proceedings Feature Dedicated to Topics in Bioethics and Health Humanities

The Compass: An Introduction

*I flew beyond this world’s compass. How strange,
I turn in this circle like the legs of a compass.*

Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi¹

In this issue of Mayo Clinic Proceedings, we mark the launch of a new section of the journal, called The Compass. This new section will feature scholarly work in biomedical ethics and the health humanities. Its goal is to promote critical analysis of foundational questions that are central to the values of medicine and public health. We invite contributors to explore emerging issues and under-examined topics in health care, particularly topics that have broad social impact or the potential to transform the practice of medicine. Consistent with its name, The Compass will seek to move medicine forward by clarifying professional commitments and considering creative problem-solving strategies. Contributors are encouraged to contact one of the section editors before submitting articles, which may take any number of forms including Original Articles, Concise Reviews for Clinicians, Subject Reviews, Special Articles, Commentaries, and Perspectives and Controversies. Articles will be peer reviewed, with emphasis placed on the unique contribution of the manuscript to broader debates in medicine and society.

It is particularly noteworthy that this series begins in a year that marks the 80th anniversary of the deaths of 3 Mayo pioneers who were central to the creation of team-based health care. Within a 4-month period during the spring and summer of 1939, as the world braced itself for the looming Second World War, Sr Mary Joseph Dempsey, OSF; Dr Charles Horace Mayo; and Dr William James Mayo all died. They were indefatigable champions of medical integrity and steadfast advocates for their patients. All faithfully collaborated to establish a broad and enduring covenant to serve others, a commitment to an empathic presence in the face of human suffering, and an abiding trust in the moral foundation of medical caregivers.

In this new section of the journal, we hope to re-establish a sense of direction in the face of the abiding ambiguity of life. The Latin ancestor of “compass” is derived from a conjunction of “com”, or “together” and “passus” or “a step or pace.”² Compass is the root of the word “compassion,” one interpretation of which implies “traveling together on a journey” and suggests the importance of the concept of “presence” to each other.³ The compass that is represented by the navigational instrument we think of today is related to the Italian compasso, the familiar circular shape of the compass box.⁴ Additional meanings refer to the instrument used to draw arcs or circles, to measure distance between points, as well as to indicate musical range.⁵ In this context, the word “compass” may be used as a verb, connoting the creation of careful circular movement that traverses all sides of a terrain. Rumi’s reference to the compass in his ode to love speaks of one foot grounded and another circling in the seemingly boundless space of inspiration.

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¹ Rumi, Jalāl ad-Dīn (1260–1320).
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Each of these interpretations of the word “compass” is a metaphor for the scholarly and creative discussions we hope this series will nurture. The Compass will be a highly contemporary forum, focusing on the implications of emerging issues in medicine and the health sciences: questions of moral and clinical decision making including the central role of presence in dealing with medical uncertainties and the many vulnerabilities of illness (for both caregivers and patients). We will strive to examine the concept of value in applied ethical thought, using traditional forms of research and scholarship as well less common creative media. We aim to travel the boundaries of form and function to facilitate interconnection and reciprocity among the medical humanities. Finally, we endeavor to understand how these scholarly efforts are to be incorporated into the arc of professional development that affects not only the caregiver but also the care of the patient over the long term.

The legacy left by the Franciscan Sisters and the Mayo family is very much alive and is itself a compass for making our way in these challenging times. It is a legacy marked by curiosity, collegiality, and the cultivation of presence. It approaches medicine as a moral enterprise dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering and the promotion of human flourishing. It requires an interdisciplinary calculus informed by a sense of adventure and creativity, seasoned by humility, and guided in no small part by the wisdom of the past and the value of community and connection.

One can only speculate as to what may have been on the minds of the Mayo community those 80 years ago as they looked to an uncertain future without the reliable compass of a generation passed. Some today may bemoan the challenges to communication and presence in this digital age, but a look back in our history reveals anxiety in every epoch. It is our hope that The Compass will give voice to the many humanistic attributes of medicine including not only ambiguity and failure but also hope, joy, and the striving for excellence within an increasingly technological world.

The English novelist E. M. Forster wrote in a diary entry in January 1908, when a successful kilometer-long airplane flight was reported, “The little houses I am used to will be swept away, the fields will stink of petrol, and the airships will shatter the stars…. Such a soul as mine will be crushed out.” His fears are characterized by disorganization, a sense of isolation and desolation, wherein the stars by which the ancient mariners sought direction are rendered invisible, leaving the sojourner adrift without direction. As in Forster’s time, today’s new technologies, ways of mining data of all kinds, advances in digital communication, and the accelerating pace of artificial intelligence create both anxiety and opportunity focused on the agency and the future direction of humanity itself.

These new languages will require new literacies in our culture at large and in their applications in health care. In his book Robot-Proof, the academic Joseph Aoun cites the importance of 4 cognitive capacities essential to interdisciplinary transformational learning needed to navigate the digital future: critical thinking; systems thinking; entrepreneurship, defined as the capacity to create value in original ways; and cultural agility. It is not coincidental that the new School of Artificial Intelligence at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology plans to integrate faculty from computer sciences with those of other disciplines, most notably the humanities.

The Bulgarian-French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva encourages a more active role for the health humanities, as “… a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural space for a bidirectional critical interrogation of both biomedicine (simple reductions of life to biology) and the humanities (simple reduction of suffering and health injustice to cultural relativism), considering the humanities along with medicine as biocultural practices.” The language that brokers this interrogation is grounded in ethical dialogue. It is a prerequisite
in clarifying the moral perspectives to help direct the work of both physician and patient and of both biomedicine and cultural meanings of illness in a co-construction of shared meaning that can generate real results.

On the occasion of his 70th birthday, Dr William J. Mayo made the following observation: “I look through a half-opened door into the future, full of interest, intriguing beyond my power to describe but with a full understanding that it is for each generation to solve its own problems and that no man has the wisdom to guide or control the next generation.”

It is our hope that through The Compass, our colleagues—wherever they may be—will have a forum to contribute their expertise in the service of solving those challenges that we have only just begun to appreciate.

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REFERENCES