



Our Interview with Poet Divina J. Santos, M.D.



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“Be good, do good, be bright, be active!”



Sally From the Norwalk Public Library: Thanks for joining us on the **Poetry Page**, Divina!

You have such a beautiful poem for your father—“**Cadena de Amor**”-- printed in our 2019 **Art & Text** Exhibit booklet. I am going to reprint it here after our conversation. Can you tell us a little about that poem?

Divina: I first wrote the poem, “*Cadena de Amor*,” in 2008 when I attended a poetry class moderated by Karen Rippstein at the Burke Rehabilitation Hospital. I was there not only to attend the poetry class, but also to check out the hospital in case I needed in-hospital rehab after my planned hip surgery (fortunately, I could have my rehab at home).

I came across my poem, “*Cadena de Amor*,” again while searching for a poem that I could read during Thea Schiller’s Poetry Class at Somers Public Library. The poem was well received. I submitted it for consideration to the Art & Text Exhibit contest held at the Norwalk Public Library last year; it was not selected for the exhibit, but was included in the booklet.

While getting ready for our 2020 Golden Jubilee celebration for our medical school graduating class, my classmate preparing the yearbook asked to see some of my poems. She included “*Cadena de Amor*.”

The Subject of my poem, “*Cadena de Amor*”

Cadena de Amor, a vine of beautiful, tiny pink and white flowers, is ubiquitous in the Philippines. When I was a student at the Francisco Balagtas Elementary School, in Santa Cruz, Manila, we celebrated Parents’ Day by wearing a corsage of pink *cadena* flowers if both parents were alive, and all-white if they were dead. If only one parent had passed—as in my case—I was expected to wear a pink and white corsage.

As a young and sensitive, orphaned child, this bothered me a lot. I was extremely close to my father, and did not take kindly to this reminder of his passing. Orphans, like me, tearfully observed the insensitivity of this practice. After a few years, thankfully, the practice of wearing a corsage was abandoned.

I think my poem highlights the unintended consequences of good intentions. The experience taught me a lesson: our words and actions effect others, and it is important for us to put ourselves in others' shoes.

"First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." –Atticus, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*

My mother was the ultimate diplomat when it came to sensitive issues, and when I am concerned or confused, I try to think how she would have approached the matter. By discussing the problem with her, I feel her presence guiding me, and I am grateful for her mothering. I am convinced that I continue to honor her by remembering the life lessons she taught me. I now know this is why I want to write my memoir.

Sally: That is an extraordinary story, Divina. And so lovely about your mother.



I am intrigued by the fact that you are a physician. I'm sure you must carry your deep empathy into that field. What made you want to study medicine?

Divina: I was a menopausal baby, born when my mother was 41. My godmothers were both physicians, and enjoyed encouraging me to be a physician like them. At just age three, I learned my first English words. When asked where I was studying, I would answer, "U.P.," short for University of the Philippines, where my godparents were alumnae! What are you studying? "Medicine!"

So you see, I knew from a very early age that I wanted to be a doctor! When I was in my fourth year in high school, my godmother enrolled me in Vocational Guidance out of fear that I was brainwashed into wanting to be a doctor! I took a battery of tests for three days which showed that my aptitude for math was only one third that of my aptitude for English. So instead of studying medicine, I was advised to select literature, philosophy, letters or social sciences. This is the first time I had actually been challenged in regards to my career choice. I banged on the guidance counselor's desktop, and proclaimed: "I'll

show you! I will be a doctor even if my aptitude for math is only one third my aptitude for English! How much math does one need to take blood pressure and a pulse? Any dummy can do that!”



True enough, I had a tough time with algebra! Even my engineer brother thought I had no math sense, which would have discouraged most people. It was like telling a music student that she/he has no ear for music. Fortunately, I persevered and got a “C” for effort in algebra, and settled for a “B” in English. Miraculously, after that hurdle, it was as if a spigot opened, and I earned scholarships which helped defray my school tuition. I was elected to the U.P. Pre-Med Honor Society, Phi Kappa Phi and Pi Gamma Mu Honor Societies, and was accepted to the U.P. College of Medicine after earning a B.S. in Pre-Medicine.

One other time during which my medical career could have been derailed was when I was offered a job as a ground stewardess for Philippine Airlines during my freshman year in medicine. I was tempted because the stench of anatomy nauseated me, and as a stewardess I could travel for free after working six months. However, all I needed to hear while asking for a leave of absence was, “Wouldn’t it be a pity if you lost your chance to become a doctor?” for me to forget the idea.



Sally: You state in your Art & Text biography that “Human sensitivity inherent in poetry can help **doctors** become **physicians**.” Please elaborate on that statement for us!

Divina: I make a distinction between **doctor** and **physician**. There are many medical doctors, but not all medical doctors are physicians.

A medical doctor is a professional who has completed the required course work and clinical rotations in order to qualify him or her to take the licensure examination to practice medicine.

A physician, on the other hand, is “a professional who practices medicine, and who is concerned with promoting, maintaining and restoring health through study, diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment of disease, injury and other physical ailments.” To me, a physician gives something more of him or herself to the patient in terms of empathy, understanding, and connection. This is what I aim for as I teach my residents and fellows the science and art of medicine; not just the science, but the art and humanity beyond the science. The bond that develops between the patient and the physician provides the reward that keeps the physician going beyond the financial remuneration, and sustains the physician with the priceless satisfaction of a job well done.

Medical practice as a physician is demanding and exhausting, but rewarding when you see the results of your efforts to heal the patient. My work as an obstetrical anesthesiologist is focused primarily in taking care of pregnant women having babies. My work is very rewarding in that I see results right away. In some other specialties, you may not see the results as dramatically as I do. When I take care of a laboring mother, she is frequently scared, in pain, needing help, patience, and understanding. Within a few minutes, I have to assess her condition, establish rapport, and provide service as expeditiously and as safely as possible. But obtaining the desired pain relief occurs almost miraculously. As I monitor her anesthetic, and complete the paper work, I take the opportunity to give her feedback. I thank her for her cooperation as I seek to empower her, and to restore her dignity and control over her own experience. This is the art of humanity.



Sally: You also state: “I started attending creative writing classes as an outlet from my hectic schedule as an obstetrical anesthesiologist at Montefiore Medical Center in 2006.” Tell us the story of how you came to write poetry!

Divina: A very close friend and classmate introduced me to creative writing classes. Fortunately many of the classes were held on weekends, or in the evening, so did not interfere with my work schedule. “Through sample poems provided during class as examples and prompts, I was reintroduced to some of the classic poets of my youth, and to modern and contemporary poems.” I was happy with the classics, but was not too keen on the modern (though they slowly grew on me). I found the poems relaxing, and they offered a good break from the scientific materials I was reading.

I particularly enjoyed meeting different kinds of people outside of the usual hospital setting, and sharing a common interest in poetry and writing.



Sally: You were introduced to literature, art, and humanities in high school and pre-med, and I know you really appreciated that. Did you always want to study medicine? And did your well-rounded education (literature, arts, humanities) help you in your career in medicine?

Divina: When I was studying Pre-Med in 1961—before applying to medical school—we were given a choice of completing the curriculum required for admission into medical school in three years if we studied during the summer break. Otherwise, we needed to complete a four-year Bachelor of Science degree before applying to Medical Schools. The argument offered us in favor of the four-year route, and to earn a B.S., emphasized the fact that at least we would have a degree in the event that we decided not to continue with Medicine. When I discovered that I would not be studying humanities, philosophy, art, literature, and languages by choosing the three-year program, I chose the four-year, and received my B.S. degree. Looking back, I am so glad! By earning my Bachelor of Science degree, I obtained a broader scope of education.

I was also very fortunate that my sister's husband was a lawyer who later became a judge. He was a voracious reader who also loved music and art. While my sister was busy with her dental practice, he invited me to accompany him on his art, music, and literary travels. He broadened my horizons. I became aware of a larger world around me beyond the four corners of a hospital. He shared his extensive collection of books, magazines, classical music, and opera. He also took me to museums.

If I did not become a doctor, I don't know what I would have done. I never considered anything else. When I was interviewed as part of my application to the U.P. College of Medicine, I was asked if I would consider being an embalmer. I was stunned by the question. I told Dean Florentino Herrera that I would only do it if the country really needed an embalmer, or if the medical school closed, but that I would plan to study medicine as soon as the medical school reopened. I also told him that I wanted to be a doctor because doctors are useful in times of peace or war.

I was very fortunate that when I came to the United States, I was matched with the University of Minnesota. Minnesota is well known for arts and theater. The Metropolitan Opera based in NY performed six operas at the Northrup Auditorium during the week they were in town. At that time we had to pick up a libretto since they did not use

subtitles. The University of Minnesota theater group performed two musicals at the Showboat in the summer. We had the Guthrie for more avant-garde plays, Theater in the Round, Chanhassen Dinner Theater, Minnesota Symphony, and The Golden Strings. I was spoiled!

Sally: I love Minnesota!



Did you enjoy poetry as a child? Did you write or read it as a child?

Divina: My Mother always sang songs, and read poetry and stories to me in Tagalog and English, so that I would take my naps. She encouraged me to memorize some poems, and quizzed me on what I read to evaluate my comprehension. She wanted me to be prepared to sing, recite a poem or dance when asked to perform in front of company. As we kissed her goodbye, she regularly exhorted us with her mantra: “Be good, do good, be bright, be active!”

I am glad that I was educated about our heroes in the Philippines, people like Jose Rizal, Apolinario Mabini, and Francisco Balagtas. I grew up admiring them for their intelligence, fortitude, accomplishments, patriotism, and love of country. I think learning about history is very important so that children can find good role models. I enjoyed reading human interest stories, poems, and other written works.

In high school, I was a member of the editorial board for the Philippine Women’s University (PWU) Newsletter, and I had a Tagalog poem published about my ambition to go to the United States, and an English poem entitled “To an Acrobat,” which was based on a show of a German acrobat performing without a net.

I enjoyed seeing my name on paper. I subscribed to *The Reader’s Digest* so that I would receive mail with my name on it. It made me feel important. One day, while waiting for my ride, I saw a four year old boy watching me intently as I opened and discarded my voluminous mail. His mother told me that he is very impressed with people who receive mail. He was delighted when I asked him to sit beside me and help me open my mail. I relish remembering how I felt about mail in my younger days.



Sally: Please tell us about your publications in journals!

Divina: I've had scientific articles published in medical journals, book chapters, and manuals. During my perusal of scientific journals like *Anesthesiology*, I became aware of a section called "Mind to Mind." It features creative efforts— poems, essays and short stories— by physicians. On publication of my featured article in the New York Society of Anesthesiologists' quarterly publication, *Sphere*—about the Montefiore Medical Center— I spoke to the editor. I told him about poetry being published in medical journals, and encouraged him to do the same with *Sphere*. Three of my poems have since been published in that journal. Poetry is regularly included in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), with Dr. and poet Rafael Campo, as editor.



Sally: I am familiar with poet Rafael Campo! He's wonderful!

Is there one particular teacher who inspired you as poet?

Divina: My first creative writing teacher, Karen Rippstein, inspired and encouraged my efforts in poetry. She introduced me to different poetic forms, and always encouraged me to attend her classes. She recently gave me a book entitled *101 Creative Writing Exercises*, and on reading about the importance of daily writing, I started writing at least one half hour everyday in my writing journal. It can be in any form just as long as I write, and it has been helpful in my memoir writing.

I literally followed Karen around wherever she taught, my work schedule permitting. I discovered nature centers (Rockefeller Preserve, Greenburgh Nature Center), public libraries all over Westchester County, and the Westchester Community College. I also discovered Mariandale Retreat Center, Divine Compassion Spirituality Center, and the Wisdom House Retreat and Conference Center in Litchfield, CT. My motto: have pen

and paper, and just write. The sharing of poems could encourage or discourage anyone, but I just kept going. I enjoy the camaraderie and friendships I make during the classes, and find it refreshing to mix and mingle with people from different backgrounds. Attending the classes at the Greenburgh Public Library has allowed me to read some of my work at the annual reading during Poetry Month in April. Reading my own work and seeing audience response can give a high.



Sally: Once the Norwalk Public Library opens its doors, Divina, I'd love to have you visit and read! Please share with us a little about your writing process.

Divina: When stymied for a topic to write about, I start a list poem and am surprised at what develops. Edward Hirsch's, "Gabriel, A Poem," has fascinated me with his novel style of contemporary poetry. I was touched by how much I learned about his son, Gabriel, in a poetry form I could not have guessed would have had an effect on me. Modern and contemporary poems are definitely resonating with me now.

When I write, I tend to be verbose because I first write everything I want to say on the subject. Then I edit and trim, trim, trim. Poetry teaches me to say more with less. It has helped me to edit and trim my work, even scientific papers, especially abstracts which are usually limited to only so many words. Even my hypercritical boss praised a few of my abstracts she reviewed.



Sally: Who are your favorite poets? What are your favorite poems? Why?

Divina: My favorite poems include: "The Psalm of Life," (Longfellow), "I Wish to Write of my Mother" (Juan F. Salazar), "My Last Farewell" ("Mi Ultimo Adios," by Jose Rizal). Other poets I enjoy: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Edgar Allan Poe

“The Psalm of Life” has been a favorite of mine since childhood; it resonates with my own value system.

“I Wish to Write of My Mother” was written by Juan F. Salazar, a Filipino poet in 1909. I memorized it so that I could recite it for my own mother on Mother’s Day. It embodies why I want to write. I want my mother to continue to live in my heart, and in the hearts of all her children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and so on. I don’t want her story to die with me. It has to be told.

Dr. Jose P. Rizal, our national hero, was a polymath. He was the youngest child who was taught to read and write at a very young age by his mother. He started writing poetry, essays, and stories in his youth, could converse in ten languages (a polyglot), and was brilliant in school. He became a doctor, and studied in Madrid, France and Germany. He was nationalistic, and wrote two books: *Noli Me Tangere (Touch Me Not)*, and *El Filibusterismo (The Reign of Greed)*. We were introduced to his poems and books, which were in Spanish or Tagalog. I idolized Rizal, and, like most school children, would recite his “Me Ultimo Adios” (“My Last Farewell”).

“Mi Ultimo Adios” was written by Rizal on the eve of his death by execution as martyr. He was wrongly accused of treason. He refused to die as a traitor, but was denied his request to face the firing squad. He turned, however, to face the firing squad after they shot him. I think his poem is the best of all. I have loved and idolized Rizal all my life, and I visit his birthplace in Calamba, Laguna, and his memorial statue in Luneta Park, every time I go home to visit.



Now, three poems by Divina Santos...

**CADENA DE AMOR
(CHAIN IF LOVE)**

by Divina J. Santos, MD

When I was five, Father stayed at the hospital for
Many days before going to Hong Kong on business
'Tis how Mother explained his prolonged absences
while showing me his passport picture.

Many days, moons, birthdays, I waited
Is Hong King very far away? Inevitably
Learning of illness, death and dying
I realize he was never coming home.

Students celebrate Parents' Day on the first Monday
Of December wearing a corsage of pink candena de amor
Except for few orphans like me who wore pink and white.
I never wanted to go to school on this day.

Must I be reminded more acutely of my loss today?
Isn't it enough I miss my father walking me to school,
Praising my homework, applauding my songs and stories,
Hugging me on his lap while I recite math tables?

Mother describes Father getting very sick, doctors and nurses
Did their best to help him, he did not want to die.
Too sick to go on his planned business trip,
He went instead on a voyage to Heaven to be with God.

Though it hurts and we miss him terribly, we should rejoice
He is in a better place—no more sickness, no more pain
In Heaven he continues to see, hear and pray for us
Someday, when we die, we can all be together again.

How does one explain death to a child so she can wrap
Her little arms around the unfathomable separation?
Believing in the afterlife eases the transition from doubt and fear
To reconciliation of faith, love, life, death and dying.

It took an eternity to come to terms with my loss. Fortunately,
Mother and much older sibs nurtured me to be a healer.
Cadena de amor, chain of love, may you continue to bind us
Like the five heart-shaped petals of pink and white.

BREAKING ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

by Divina J. Santos, MD

No self-respecting Filipino kitchen
Will ever be caught without requisite vinegar
Why 'tis the essence of Philippine cooking!
Cuts saltiness of soy sauce
Releases piquancy of crushed garlic

Squeezes peppery bite from whole peppercorns
As bay leaves adsorb fishy flavor of meat
Do not forget, *la piece de resistance*,
A final topping just before the last boil -
A fourth of a cup coconut milk.

Voila, my especial chicken adobo! Ahhh, as it boils
And simmers, you are enraptured unexpectedly
By aroma so appealing, provocative, memorable!
A Philippine staple of chicken, pork or both
Magically captured with artful blend of spices.

So it lures my shy, elderly, uninitiated
Gopher landlord from tending his favorite garden.
Overcome by the gnawing hunger it evokes, he asks,
“Pray, what is this that smells so heavenly?
Can I have a taste of what you are cooking?”

He devours a hefty serving of freshly cooked white rice
Carpeted by copious thick brown sauce of chicken adobo.
With gusto and thoroughness, he
Sucks chicken bones, leaves, fork, plate, everything!
A dish never to be forgot, I own him for life!

Looking back to that day many years ago
I do not think I ever cooked chicken adobo
As good as I did that day. 'Tis true
What they say about the shortest distance
To a man's heart is through his stomach.

I wrote this poem in a *Learning to See Poetry* class facilitated by Kate Gallagher at the Greenburgh Library 5 years ago. She wanted us to write a poem based on what spice scent we selected from the 15 kitchen scents she brought in. After some revisions since its publication in the UPMASAN Newsletter, I presented it in my poetry class with Thea Schiller at the Somers Library, and it was well received. It inspired my classmate, Lynn, to cook chicken adobo for dinner that Sunday! She & her husband enjoyed it! That was most flattering!

PRAYER OF AN ANESTHESIOLOGIST

by Divina J. Santos, MD

I am a medical challenge to diagnose
Emergency doctor insists on a complete work-up
Despite normal cardiac evaluation for gastric distress
Two years earlier. Analyzing data points a la Sherlock
Confirms “silent” coronary disease requiring cardiac surgery.

Aware that anesthesia requires airplane precision, I inquire:
“Can I have a pre-op tune-up before this long trip?
Watch what I eat, lose a few pounds, exercise...”
Cardiac surgeon in shock, “I need to fix your heart ASAP!
We don’t even know when you are having a heart attack!”

The Cardiac Team gets busy preparing me for surgery
Family, friends, colleagues call, visit and pray with me
Feeling at home in very good hands at my hospital,
I meditate to peaceful slumber the eve of -
Deciding not to worry older sister in Australia.

At dawn, a dear face takes me to the Operating Room
Reception line of co-workers cheer me along
After checking ID, date of birth, consent for surgery,
I slide from gurney as OR lights loom strange overhead
Scrub tech counts instruments and sponges with circulating nurse.

My anesthesiologists welcome and secure my arms to side boards.
Peering thru eyes at half mast, I’m acutely aware of happenings:
Breaths in and out of nostrils, cold reassuring monitors
Tight squeeze of blood pressure cuff, exquisite prick of IV
Antibiotic rush, delicious oxygen hovering over my face.

Glancing at Attending palpating artery in my left wrist, I imagine
Dr. Jose P. Rizal, my idol and beloved hero beside me
Everyone in place, surgical checklist complete
My anesthesiologist rubs my cheek, “Are you ready for take off?”
I nod as the poetry of life blooms into prayer of complete surrender.

