This keynote lecture will focus on the unities and separations found in health care. Since we are all mortals who live with bodies, we share properties of the mortal state, including pain and pleasure and death. Health care is one of the primary means of supporting and maintaining this body, this equipment of living. We experience this mortal state in our own singular ways, though, and health care is deeply complicated by the divides that separate the individual patient from the individual clinician, from language and class to values and sources of meaning.

We can heighten the unities and diminish the separations in health care delivery through attentive listening, skilled writing to represent what is heard, and active affiliation between clinician and patient. Creativity is at the heart of the listening, the writing, and the affiliating as the clinician tries to imagine the situation of the patient and to enter the narrative world being described and lived through by the patient.

Using these creative means, patients and clinicians can cross the boundaries that separate them to reduce isolation, to recognize one another, even to bear witness to the suffering that forms the heart of their work. When done with rigor, such a practice—I call it narrative medicine—results in accurate knowledge of the patient, shared choosing of goals of care, and reciprocal recognition of both patient and clinician as mortals, doing their best to live until they die.