In his nearly three decades at the College of Medicine, Professor of Surgery Frank Ittleman, M.D., has treated thousands of patients, and written many words that describe his experiences, personal and professional, across the years. Every season for the past several years, his essays have appeared as the “Let’s Close” column in UVM Surgery, the quarterly newsletter of the Department of Surgery. Ittleman has used his column to explore a range of topics — from a deeply personal reminiscence of his recently deceased physician-father-in-law, to comments on the eternal rivalries of baseball. Most often, he delves into a small but telling facet of the doctor’s life, as in the two recent essays featured here.

Deep inside, I always knew that I would be a doctor. Knowing connotes a certain degree of predetermination while wanting or needing speaks to a void that demands to be filled.

As a young boy growing up on Long Island, I doubt that I wanted for much of anything.

In our youth, my friends and I were guided into manhood in ever so subtle ways. Jokingly, the choices were simple. Be a doctor, a lawyer or an Indian chief.

Medicine, for me, seemed to be a settled issue, while the law was the domain of several of my friends whose fathers had already made inroads into their psyches.

As for Indian chiefs, the job market for this profession did not seem to be particularly promising on the north shore of Long Island, circa 1960.

My father was an old-fashioned general practitioner. Old fashioned by today’s standards, but probably very much up-to-date 50 years ago. When he left our home to make house calls, which he did every day, he would be carrying a large, worn leather bag in his left hand which made him list ever so slightly to the port side. It had pockets and compartments galore that held the secrets of his trade. There was the standard issue sphygmomanometer and
My mother was told once that talking to her husband was like talking to a priest, only better. legs. He always carried more weight than he wanted, but the postwar years were not ones spent on physical fitness. Lean body mass and low carb diets had yet to be invented and cigarettes were ubiquitous even among those who should have known better. To me, he seemed bigger than he was. My measurement was somewhat subjective, my small arms trying to encircle his bare chest for a hug before bed always seemed to be a very comforting challenge.

My father’s stature was in his character. He was a gregarious man who made and kept friends easily. He was smart and inquisitive, an enviable combination that led to eclectic hobbies that never ceased to surprise me. One month it was the accordion, another origami, only to be followed by building antique model cars and sailboats in bottles. He had fine hands and I only learned years later that he had planned on being a surgeon until his freshman home for the holiday, I was not about to run to the great books, those had probably been read and discarded well before I came along, but rather to the latest detective novel whose literary merit would barely measure on the Richter scale.

Several weeks later, a letter arrived from my father which consisted of two pages of yellow legal-size paper covered with words that he had gleaned from his paperback novels. The greeting, in his beautiful penmanship, was unmistakable in its beauty. It read, “Dear Frank, see how many of these you know. Love, Dad.” It was one of the shortest, yet most poignant letters that I ever received from my father. Needless to say, I knew very few of those words. I have long forgotten the list, but not the lesson that he wanted me to learn.

Somewhere in these remembrances, I went from knowing to wanting. My father loved his work very much and I thought that I would love mine, as well. My mother was told once that talking to her husband was like talking to a priest, only better. I would be foolish to compare the ecstasy of an ecclesiastical dialogue with that of talking to a general practitioner, but now, after years of practice, I know how comforting and reassuring just such a conversation can be.

There they are again, those words, some arcane, some simple, all with meaning and nuance, the endless list waiting patiently to be plucked out of the air.

“Let’s Close” column, UVM Surgery Newsletter, Fall 2006
really “brightens up” the venue. If I prod a bit, I might get a tip on how to repair the two-inch hole in the sheetrock of our family room that bore the brunt of my fifteen-year-old son’s pursuit of Henry Aaron’s home run record.

Ultimately, we conclude with words about layers. The coats and coats of paint that hide the defects and imperfections of age and seal in the memories that have accumulated over decades. It has been said that the age and quality of a great tree’s life, the insults that it has had to bear over time, can be determined by the concentric rings of its trunk; I dare say that the life of an old hospital room, hallway or surgical suite can be defined, metaphorically speaking, by the number of coats of paint that cover its walls.

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The Baird stairwell is now painted beige. Not a particularly inviting color, but nowhere is it written that stairwells need to be hospitable. I was descending that stairwell twenty-five years ago when I was greeted with music wafting up from the landing below. The singer was a patient of mine who still goes by one name (I am not certain if it is his first or last) and with guitar in hand, he was attempting his best Dylan imitation with a rendition of “Hey Mr. Tambourine Man.” His shirt was off, exposing his fresh incision, his hair was in a ponytail and his IV pole was precariously balanced on a step. His audience was a bevy of student nurses who obviously were enjoying the impromptu concert. I retreated from where I came with a smile and a nod, a moment of pleasure after a long day. I believe the walls were light green then.

The Smith stairwell is a bit darker now and far less traveled than before. The walls are an off-white or beige, but the chips indicate that coats of paint lie beneath. The railings are solid oak, smooth and secure to the touch. A hidden, but appreciated find amid the plastic and steel of institutional construction.

In 1905, when the College of Medicine completed its third home at the corner of Prospect and Pearl streets in Burlington, the main lecture room where students spent so much of their time was named Hall A. The Hall A magazine section seeks to be a meeting place for all former students of the College of Medicine.

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