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Editor's Introduction to "Finding Wholeness as Scholars, Teachers, and Healers through Narrative Medicine and the Medical Humanities," a Special Issue of *Survive and Thrive, A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*¹

by David E. Beard

“we are all poetry
crossing
an act of poetic faith
to be present to one another”
(Rex Veeder, “Hectic Zen”)

We take inspiration for this special issue of *Survive and Thrive* from the career of Rex Veeder. Veeder founded the Survive and Thrive Conference and Arts Festival, which became a staging ground for the kinds of conversations that sustain this journal. His career represents an effort of “poetic faith to be present to one another,” and we come together in this issue to honor him, to be present with him.

Co-sponsored by St. Cloud State University, local medical providers, non-profits, and survivor networks, the Survive and Thrive Conference and Arts Festival blossomed on October 24 - 27, 2012 at River's Edge Convention Center in Saint Cloud, MN. While the scope of the conference and art festival was wide, Veeder's partnership with survivors of Sudden Cardiac Arrest, their caregivers and families gave the event distinction.² Between 300 and 350 thousand people die of SCA every year in the United States. Yet, rarely do events focus on awareness of SCA. Survive and Thrive did just that, with concerts, poetry readings, and art displays; scientific demonstrations, CPR instruction, and best practices of EMS. The conference and art festival, as well as the journal, are both eclectic and focused. We are eclectic in that we consider all the disciplines of Medicine and the Humanities; we are focused in that we foreground the needs of survivors, patients and caregivers. The scholarship, art and literature we produce must speak *to* and *with*, not *about* or *above*, the needs of survivors, patients and caregivers.

In its later iterations, the conference and art festival would include performances of *The Headwater Blues Opry* and an innovative residency in which artists would work to represent survivor experiences. The conference grew into both online and onsite events, bringing a national community into conversation.³

Survive and Thrive transformed Veeder's composition classes at St. Cloud State University and his poetry workshops online. In both, Veeder encouraged student-writers to bring their whole experience into language. In co-creating [with Leon Laudenbach] and staging his own musical [*The Headwater Blues Opry*] in St. Cloud, Minnesota, he encouraged his audience, cast and crew to find ways to heal. Medical humanities and narrative medicine have been the tools by which Rex has constructed a wholeness of his experience as a survivor of Sudden Cardiac Arrest and by which Rex has invited others to experience that wholeness together.

In constructing this special issue of *Survive and Thrive*, the twin traditions of medical humanities and narrative medicine represent a kind of integrative work: bringing questions of

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² Rex is a survivor of Sudden Cardiac Arrest.

³ Special thanks to Molly Wright, who shepherded Survive and Thrive into an online era.

medicine and health to the arts and humanities, and bringing questions of art and storytelling to medicine. In assembling this special issue, then, we feature research by a medical anthropologist, by a psychologist, by scholars of literature and the humanities, and more.⁴ We collect reflections from caregivers as well as survivors in creative nonfiction. We feature poetry crafted by poets as well as physicians.⁵ Within the pages of this journal, our conversation reconstructs health as a product of the holistic experience of medicine, art and storytelling.

“If you want something you will not get it; what you do get might be better.”
(Rex Veeder, “Hectic Zen”)

I met Rex Veeder when I was a graduate student, enamored of his work on Coleridge. By the end of the twentieth century, Coleridge was a marginal figure in English studies, his light having fallen when the Romantics fell out of fashion among literary and rhetorical critics. But Veeder saw in Coleridge a way to ignite the imagination of students, to respect their imagination and its power, and to focus that power in the act of writing. Veeder was a figure working in the margins, in a tradition that began with Coleridge, ran through I. A. Richards, found expression in the textbooks and scholarly writings of Ann Berthoff, and continued in Veeder’s works. It is a powerful tradition.

Veeder was one of several figures responsible for constructing rhetorical studies as a discipline. As the editor of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* [1993–1995], Veeder worked to transform a newsletter into a journal, to transform an informal collection of scholar-friends into an international organization for the study of rhetoric. I want to acknowledge Veeder’s stature as a traditional academic. The Rex Veeder I knew in my twenties was a mentor and a role model in the narrowest of professional lives. At the time, I didn’t know I wanted more than that.

Rex is retiring from teaching. He has been teaching for nearly fifty years, but wants to spend more time with his partner. Rex tells me that “We have been together since 1984. I expect her in the room or around the corner. She has committed her life to me and me to her. The commitment is not an obligation. It is a way of life.” In his commitment to his home and to the vision for community he created in *Survive and Thrive*, the Rex Veeder I know now is a mentor and role model toward the richest and most fulfilling of lives. He models the wholeness exemplified in this special issue.

“long for something missing
don't be afraid
something is always missing”
(Rex Veeder, “Hectic Zen”)

⁴ Scholarly articles undergo external, “double blind” peer review by at least one professional academic and “single blind” review by at least one member of the editorial team [which for this issue included Julia Brown, David Beard, Jason Tham, Rex Veeder, and Steven B. Katz].

⁵ Creative works, whether creative nonfiction or poetry, undergo external, “double blind” peer review by at least one creative writer and “single blind” review by at least one member of the editorial team [which for this issue included Julia Brown, David Beard, Jason Tham, Rex Veeder, and Steven B. Katz]. The distinction between processes for review of creative writing and processes for review of research is small but significant: the creative writers who served as external reviewers of creative writing are not always academics.