

The (In)Destructible Body

Many are familiar with the sound of a saw cutting through wood. The rhythmic strokes of the saw going up and down is almost soothing and thoughts of the finished product; a new desk, chair, or wood to burn in the fire, gives excitement and strength to finish the laborious task at hand. But the sound of saw cutting through bone? It is a sound that cannot be accurately described. This sound can only be experienced and leaves a lasting impression on how fragile, how easily destructible the human body can be.

Before coming into medical school, I saw the human body as something that is indestructible, something that can defy its limitations and achieve the impossible. Any trauma, from a scrape to the skin to a broken bone, can heal. Little did I know these thoughts of stability and strength would vanish the moment I stepped into the cadaver lab. As the metal teeth of the saw disappeared into the flesh of our donor's body, the indestructible quickly became the destructible.

The sound of a saw cutting through bone is like no other. It is a mixture of sawing wood, snapping twigs and the crunching of damp leaves beneath your feet. There is no rhythm to the strokes, as the metal teeth of the saw sticks between the fat and coagulated blood or become misaligned from the labyrinthine trabeculae of the bone. It is a grotesque sound, but I am able to dismiss it quickly due to the intense focus and energy needed to keep the saw moving. One arm, then two arms are not enough to cut through the bone. I resort to using the weight of my entire body to slide the saw across. The body laid before me is resisting and fighting to show that it is still indestructible despite its impending destruction.

In that moment I realize that *I* am sawing through a human body, *I* am causing all this destruction, but all I feel is the emptiness inside me as I make way past each vertebra. Where was my admiration for the indestructible human body? How could I not feel shame or sorrow for wanting to destroy this body? Is it the disbelief at how easily I volunteered to pick up the saw? Is it my reluctance to believe that I actually enjoyed cutting through the body? Or is it that it is not the human body that is indestructible, but the person that occupies it?

I still do not have a clear answer as to why I felt that emptiness inside me. However, it has made me reflect and reevaluate what is truly indestructible about the human body. While I still marvel at the body's regenerative properties, it is merely a shell that can easily be broken. What is indestructible is the person inside it that wills it so. My cadaver donor, my first patient, taught me once again why physicians take care of the person and not the physical ailment. My donor/patient wanted me to experience the destruction to learn that it is the person that is indestructible.