“SO, TELL ME ABOUT NARRATIVE HEALTHCARE.”

The heart surgeon’s voice on the phone was commanding, the kind of voice that prompts a nurse to pick up a scalpel. I felt I had two seconds to deliver a one-minute elevator speech about the program I had launched at Lenoir-Rhyne University in 2013.

“In this program, we will read stories and write reflectively. We’ll study literature, theory, and philosophy, and you will write more than you have in a very long time.”

“How will that make us better doctors?”

I can feel the stress the notion of “more work” stirs. Aren’t there enough demands already? How do you frame a reply that doesn’t add to the stress — and judgment — physicians and healthcare workers already feel? What more can they possibly take on?

Sitting in my car, hearing my teenager’s drumming through a window, I wonder, is it too soon to go into biopsychosocial shifts occurring in medical education? Doctors listen to data. I went with data.

“The Journal of the American Medical Association and other publications have published multiple articles supporting the role of writing and stories in preventing burnout for doctors and supporting healing for patients. Writing enhances listening, and with enhanced listening you can better hear what’s inside patients’ stories.”

“There isn’t time to listen to patients’ stories,” Dr. Waters responded. “Once they start, they’ll talk forever.” And then came the statement I so often hear, a declaration of defeat, a closing of the door of possibility: “I’m not sure I buy it.”

“LET’S TRY THIS ONE.”

A hedgehog puzzle, formal and carefully placed, will add a new level of focus to the program. Lenoir-Rhyne has 2,200 students, 105 faculty members, 50,000 alumni, and a central core of 500 graduate students, nestled in downtown Hickory, NC, the heart of furniture country.

“Writing Toward Healing” will be offered as a one-year certificate (24 credits), fully online (12 credits), or on campus (12 credits). The certificate can be completed in 14 months, and the MFA in Writing can be completed in two years. Completing the program will take half the time of a conventional MFA, and the certificate is less expensive.

“LET’S TRY THIS ONE.”

The program will be taught by the late Thomas Wolfe, the American Gothic artist, who was born and raised in nearby Asheville and wrote much of The Web and the Rock, his only published novel, in the century-old Lenoir-Rhyne campus. At the time of his death, in 1938, he wrote that writing was his “life’s work” and he wrote to heal himself and his readers.

“LET’S TRY THIS ONE.”

Students will be guided through the process of writing and revising their work, which will be published in various forms, including print, online, and digital. The program will also include workshops, readings, and guest lectures by professional writers, and will culminate in a public reading and exhibition.

“LET’S TRY THIS ONE.”

The program will be open to students with a BA or equivalent, and will provide a platform for them to develop their writing skills and to explore their creative potential.

“I FELT I HAD TWO SECONDS TO DELIVER A ONE-MINUTE ELEVATOR SPEECH ABOUT THE PROGRAM I HAD LAUNCHED AT LENOIR-RHYNE UNIVERSITY.”

Laura Hope-Gill directs the Thomas Wolfe MFA in Writing Program and Narrative Healthcare Certificate Program at Lenoir-Rhyne University in Asheville, NC. Her memoir of deafness is forthcoming from Pisgah Press. She earned an MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, NC. She has published two books of architectural history and, with photographer John Fletcher, Jr., a collection of poetry, The Soul Tree: Poems and Photographs of the Southern Appalachians (Grateful Steps, 2009). She has recently joined the board of the Institute for Poetic Medicine.