

BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEW

Akahige (Red Beard)

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**Book Title:** Akahige (Red Beard)**Author:** Akira Kurosawa**Publication Details:** Kurosawa Productions, 1965, 185 minutes, streaming on HBO Max, Amazon Prime, and others

The movie *Akahige*, set in the early 1800s, details the transformation of a young, arrogant doctor, Yasumoto, through his apprenticeship with an older physician—nicknamed Akahige (Red Beard)—whose gruff and dictatorial ways are combined with a deep compassion for the suffering of the poor in a village outside of mainstream society. Akahige carries a deep understanding of his patients' burdens and rails against poverty, ignorance, and the cruelty of wealth that add to their suffering. In this movie, Yasumoto learns about humanity in medicine and the effects of societal structures on health by being present with Akahige's patients through their pain, listening to and learning their stories, and through his own illness. The movie is based on a collection of short stories, *Red Beard's Clinic*, written in 1958 by Shugoro Yamamoto and translated from Japanese into English in 2023.¹

In one scene, Yasumoto takes care of a dying patient and sits with him until the end. Akahige tells the young doctor, "Nothing is so solemn as a man's last moment. Watch him closely." The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us of that terrible truth. While Yasumoto says, "The pain and loneliness of death frighten me," he still perseveres. And as the saintly young man dies, Yasumoto is profoundly moved by the experience. In modern times, where most people die in hospitals and house calls are uncommon, we rarely have opportunities to sit through our own patients' last solemn moment.

In another scene, Yasumoto tries to give medicine to a young girl whom he and Akahige, in an extraordinary scene in the film, rescued from a brothel. She keeps refusing it by slapping his hand every time he tries. Akahige demonstrates how to build a relationship with patience and generosity. He keeps trying to give medication to her calmly and, after many attempts and refusals, finally succeeds.

In yet another scene, Yasumoto contracts an infection—one of the many that were rampant in the 18th century—and becomes gravely ill. He is nursed by the same young girl who Yasumoto took care of. He slowly returns to life after the grave illness. He is full of gratitude and is a different person. In the literature, shamans are chosen to be healers who have experienced near-death experiences. Compassion is learned through one's own suffering. The young doctor is ready to be a healer.

At the end of the movie, after being offered a position to return to mainstream society and assume a position as physician to the Shogun, which was his initial dream, Yasumoto decides to stay working with Akahige. He has found a purpose. He will dedicate himself to serving the poor community and the forgotten. "You taught me the road to take and now I will take it," he tells Akahige.

While many things about doctoring have changed since the early 1800s, many remain the same. The lessons for family medicine are obvious. Being a family doctor is hard work, both emotionally and physically. Serving patients and communities is not for the fainthearted. The hard work of caring calls on us to deal with loss and suffering. But the redemptive qualities of caring for patients over time earn their respect and trust. Curiosity and patience in caring are the core of developing relationships with patients and learning their stories. And, as Akahige explains, "There is always some story of great misfortune behind illness." The young doctor learns, as we can, that those stories are often profound and become part of our own personal story forever.

REFERENCES

1. Yamamoto S. *Red Beard's Clinic*. Marshall S, trans. Shelley Marshall; 2023.