

CHAPTER

1

Presidential Address: "Physician, Heal Thyself"

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It has been a great honor and privilege for me to serve as President of this dynamic organization, the Congress of Neurological Surgeons. I have enjoyed my involvement in Congress activities since completing my training in neurosurgery at the Cleveland Clinic almost 12 years ago. For the past 7 years, as a member of the Executive Committee and as an officer of this society, I have enjoyed the association of outstanding men and their charming wives. For this experience I am deeply appreciative.

I cannot proceed further, however, without expressing gratitude to four neurosurgeons who have exerted a significant influence on my professional life.

I am appreciative of Dr. Michael Scott, Emeritus Professor of Neurosurgery at Temple University School of Medicine, who kindled within me the flame of interest in neurosurgery as I encountered him during my student days. I observed him as a compassionate gentleman, and I was impressed.

I am appreciative of Dr. W. James Gardner, with whom I trained and who is known to us, his former fellows and residents, as "The Boss." He taught me, among many other things, that small observations, often seemingly unimportant, can lead to significant discoveries. He is a true clinical researcher with a bright active mind, even today in his late 70's.

I am appreciative of Dr. Wallace B. Hamby, who was my chief, whose surgical technique was masterful, and whose deftness with instruments and his hands was incredibly precise, yet sensitive. His contribution to me, among others, was that intraoperative and postoperative problems are often solved or eliminated by careful, definitive surgical technique. He loved working on the brain and spinal cord, and he was exceptionally gentle with them.

Finally, I appreciate my good friend and mentor, Dr. Donald F. Dohn, the neurosurgeon's neurosurgeon. Loved and respected by his fellows and associates, he taught me that pride should be an inner personal feeling of a job well-done, not a haughty attitude to be used in the belittlement of

others. Don Dohn taught me compassion and empathy for the suffering patient.

I am appreciative of, beyond my ability to express in words, the contributions of these great men to my life. I believe it was George Washington who once said, "Great men like ships move steadily forward not affected by every ill wind that blows against them." I believe these men fit that description.

Today, I shall not report on the state of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, its accomplishments in the past year with the establishment of the Congress journal *Neurosurgery*, under the superb editorship of Dr. Robert H. Wilkins, nor shall I report on the successes in those areas of joint activities with the American Association of Neurological Surgeons, such as Socio-economics, Materials and Devices, Continuing Education, and Newsletter, to name but a few; suffice it to say we are accomplishing much with our joint efforts.

I have selected, instead, the theme of my Presidential Address from the Gospel of St. Luke in the Bible: "Physician, heal thyself" (7). My remarks may offend some or may narcotize others, but whatever your reactions, know that I have given long hours of thought and meditation coupled with reading and research to finally crystallize these thoughts for this presentation. These thoughts and words are reinforced by the wisdom of great and wise men. I would hope that perhaps you would gain from these words some motivation which will be a positive, uplifting influence in your life.

Despite the discontent of American citizens as consumers, the physician is still regarded as high on the list of those most admired by the public. In fact, the physician's main competition for first place as the most admired professional has been the Justices of the Supreme Court of this great nation.

A Gallup poll several months ago revealed that the profession of physician was ranked high among those professions viewed by the American public as "most honest" and having the "highest ethical standards" (3). This pedestal of esteem has been our close companion for decades. Specifically, neurosurgery has been rated in the top two specialties in medicine as most respected by both the public and our medical colleagues. Thus we hold a very enviable position in the eyes of society, despite our minority position in numbers.

These humanly bestowed honors appear to be in opposition to the theme of my presentation, "Physician, heal thyself," but there is a sickness in our ranks which must be healed. The rising tide of consumerism has tended to transform the art and science of medicine into a "product" which government and other bureaucracies insist can be delivered. We note that the physician has been labeled as the main cause and

finds himself the scapegoat for the ever-increasing costs of medical services. A recent Chicago newspaper editorial written by Sidney J. Harris accuses the physician of "arrogance" (6). He suggests that many doctors "play God" and have a "tendency to talk down to the patient," placing him on a lower human level than themselves. The president of a large prominent Midwestern university recently suggested that medicine as a profession is attempting to stifle the professionalism of other occupations (2). A Mountain-States Survey by two marketing professors reveals that adults perceive doctors as overpaid, late for appointments, overworked, inaccessible, disinterested, lacking in humor, and slow (4). Recent Medicare and Medicaid scandals have prostrated the physician as dishonest and irresponsible, although these charges have been leveled at less than 1% of our profession. Recent advances in the technical aspects of medicine have tarnished the long generally accepted doctor image of concern, compassion, and empathy. When it has been revealed that doctors are 30 to 100 times more likely to become addicted to narcotics and have a suicide rate two times greater than the general public, perhaps there is some tilt to the pedestal upon which we have found ourselves for so long.

Regardless of with which side of the physician image the American populace decides to cast its lot, whether for high esteem or suspicious contempt, there remains this fact, obvious and overwhelming, that all is not well in the medical profession. The rising emphasis on the teaching of medical ethics in our medical schools reflects a reaction to a need (16). Scientific knowledge is not sufficient to care for the sick, which is the first and primary obligation of the physician, but, in addition, high and unyielding moral standards are essential to be a complete physician. But to be a complete physician is not enough. Every physician should yearn to be the complete human being. Felix Marti-Ibanez, the former editor and publisher of *M. D.*, wrote that, "I sincerely feel that every man carries in his soul the seed of greatness, regardless of how ordinary or mundane his life, his work or his dreams, just as I believe everyone bears within himself a shackled God that must eventually be released" (11). Though I believe every man has a seed of greatness and a shackled God within him, I believe that the release of the same is not a must, but is related directly and depends almost solely upon the desire, effort, and self-control of that person.

There are four general areas of a physician's commitment which, with your indulgence, I shall attempt to examine. These are his allegiance to science and the profession, to society, to God, and to family.

The first of these is the physician's commitment to science and the profession, which should always be directed toward the search for truth. Truth is eternal and does not change. Truth is the end point at which we

arrive after all measures and experiments of a scientific world are tried and the answer is always the same. Theory is not truth, although after theory is tested it may be found to be truth. Theory cannot in and of itself be construed as truth until proven. James Talmage wrote that, "Theories may be regarded as the scaffolding upon which the builder stands while placing the blocks of truth in position. It is a grave error to mistake the scaffolding for the wall, or the flimsy temporary structure for the stable and permanent. Theories have their purpose and are indispensable but they must never be mistaken for demonstrated facts" (15).

I observe in this country and in most countries that there exists a large heterogeneous group I shall call the partial-truth seekers. Partial-truth seekers search for truth in one area, but reject it in another. They may demand political truth, but reject scientific truth, or they may demand scientific and economic truth, but deny moral truth. Perhaps you and I have moved in and out of this large heterogenous group of partial-truth seekers on several occasions, accepting facts and truth in one area but rejecting them in another. I would say that those who seek only part of the truth seek no truth. If a widely held theory is found to be incorrect, it should be disregarded just as new found truths should be eagerly and readily embraced.

A positive contribution to the body of scientific knowledge can be made by proper mental discipline. The motives for research are several. Some workers, probably many, seek recognition for themselves as the final end point or goal of discovery. I contend that significant scientific contributions will come when the investigator is consumed with a desire to discover, based on the excitement to solve and overcome, or when such a discovery will change the suffering of a few, or many, to a life of relief and fulfillment. Randall Meyer, President of Exxon Company, said that "Truly outstanding achievers are set apart from others more by the exhilaration they find in their work in the act of achieving itself than by the intensity of their desires for rewards that follow" (13). The accomplishment of solving a difficult problem will bring satisfaction which can come in no other manner.

Just as we seek for truth, we should inexhaustibly seek for excellence in our practice of medicine. If we desire less than excellence, we lack personal honesty. It is inconceivable that a neurosurgeon would consciously render mediocre patient care, but in our haste of pursuing less laudable goals and misplaced priorities we may find our patients receiving substandard treatment. May we have the insight to search ourselves, discover our weaknesses, and resolve to change them for the benefit of our patients.

This leads me to the second area of commitment a neurosurgeon should consider, that of our allegiance to society. I am not the only one, I am

certain, who has observed a leadership vacuum in this country and in the world. I do not refer specifically to a deficit at the national level, although our national and state governments in some considerable measure are guided by politicians, rather than statesmen, and by committees, rather than principles. We as physicians, and neurosurgeons in particular, have the capacity to contribute substantially to our community by providing leadership. Clear thought can cut through clouds of self-serving rhetoric. In our time of limited public funds for use in the best interest of friends and neighbors, it becomes imperative that a calm, steady hand be applied to the rudder of our governmental barge. I am convinced that we can have a significant influence for good if we commit the time. Time is one of our most precious possessions, but if we are concerned about the course of our society we may well have to sacrifice some of our personal desires and pleasures for the good of the whole. I am not making a plea for neurosurgeons to run for high elective office, but I am suggesting that we become involved in community affairs and activities. Participation on civic committees both for the arts and cultural elevation of the community, or on committees and councils where our influence will be for the common good of our neighbors, would be worthwhile endeavors. Service in youth organization, school boards, councils and committees for rehabilitation of our citizens and involvement in organizations such as Rotary, Kiwanis, Chamber of Commerce, and so forth will allow medicine to exert a positive influence, not only by lending leadership, but also, as a public relations mechanism, by reversing the critical image we have acquired in recent years. All it requires is time, usually not much, but the investment will return to you and me and medicine a manyfold increase.

Allegiance to God, the third of man's laudable commitments, may come in many ways, but come it must for the complete human soul to develop. Dr. Morgan Martin wrote in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that "The physician needs a belief system, whether he calls it philosophy, faith or their combination known as religion. He needs almost automatic assumptions to sustain him with his patients and preserve him for his family. Faced with life and death, pain and suffering, and problems that do not lend themselves to solution, he must fall back on what he is and what he believes. This means the physician must be clear about his own position on matters of body, mind, and spirit. In treating the patient, the following big questions arise: What is man? Why is he here? What is his place in the world, the universe, and the cosmos? Patients who pose such questions force the physician to search himself for answers" (12). I believe the first step in man's search for a relationship with God comes in his attitude and expression to his fellowman, as in Hunt's famous poem, *Abou Ben Adhem* (9). Has this not been the standard by which man's true belief and commitment to God has always

been measured? I believe most neurosurgeons have taken the first step, for they exhibit genuine concern for their fellowmen.

Our patients, whether pauper or king, deserve our best care. I like to think that neurosurgeons are more than average or common. Hopefully, we are driven by deep motivations, and because of our special talents to turn the dumb and stuporous into alert, appreciative, contributing lives, we must not look upon patients from a monetary or status-producing perspective. Washington Irving noted that "There is a healthful heartiness about real dignity that never dreads contact or communication with others, however humble."

The reading of uplifting and inspiring books and articles will fill the mind with lofty ideals, for a man is as he thinks and consciously visualizes. Paul Varley warned that "You must live as you think; if not, sooner or later you will end up thinking as you live."

Sir William Osler, revered and respected as the great example of the complete physician, not only for his medical expertise but also for his wisdom and compassion, read the Holy Bible almost every night before retiring, as recorded in Osler's biography by Harvey Cushing (1). Osler firmly believed that he needed this spiritual support in his hour-to-hour, day-to-day activities. I believe as did Ambrose Paré, physician and surgeon of the French Revolution, who wrote these words regarding those he treated on the battlefield, "I dressed him and God healed him" (5). More and more, it becomes evident that occurrences transpire in our lives, private, public, and professional, which can only be explained by a power greater than that that can be found on this terrestrial sphere. To establish a relationship with our creator is a maturing experience, not a sign of personal weakness; it is a pearl of great price to be sought after with eager diligence. John Ruskin, the English artist and critic of the 19th Century, once said that "he who offers God second place, offers him no place."

The fourth and final allegiance I wish to pursue is that to the family. There is wisdom in the remark of the seer who uttered that "No other success can compensate for failure in the home" (14). The stabilizing effect of a happy home on a human life is indisputable. In a recent survey, the Institute of Life Insurance determined that 80% of the persons questioned chose a happy home life as the most important major goal in their lives. This far exceeds the 13% who placed opportunity for development as an individual as the most important goal, the 3% who first would choose a fulfilling career, and the 4% whose top desire was making lots of money (10). Interestingly, neurosurgery as a profession fulfills these last and least-voted three desires of money, personal development, and a fulfilling career, although it may be argued neurosurgery tends to erode a happy home life. For a family to compete with the jealous

mistress, neurosurgery, requires the full support of the neurosurgeon father. Johann Von Goethe, the German poet and philosopher, said that "things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least." What I am suggesting is better time management and planning so wife and children can depend on the supportive presence of a husband and father. What I am suggesting is the reservation of blocks of time which family members can plan to enjoy, with and in the presence of, the husband and father. This cannot always be guaranteed for emergencies and other urgencies will arise, but time not planned is time not spent. To strengthen the family unit, the basic unit of society, is to strengthen this country and any country which advocates family togetherness. The greatest lessons of life should be taught and learned within the walls of our homes. It is indeed unfortunate that some people reach the top rung of the ladder of success only to find that the ladder has been leaning against the wrong wall. Would this not be analogous to the physicians, and neurosurgeons, who succeed in medicine but fail as husbands and fathers in the home?

The future always arrives a little before we are ready to give up the present. Is it not now time, regardless of our years, to review, to change, to correct, and to improve all areas of our lives? Let us not be like the fish who discovers water last. Is it not natural to look back upon our lives and with humble honesty be able to say that "We have done our best," or as Paul in his twilight years uttered, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished my work" (8).

Let us not forget our obligation to our profession and science and our obligation to society and our fellowmen. Let us not forget our duty to that God whose children we are. Let us not forget the joy and happiness which will come from tender, considerate expressions and cultivation of true love to our family at home.

Physician, heal thyself, before the disease of apathy and personal pleasure is terminal. Colleagues and friends, this day we stand at a crossroads. The decision plainly faces us. The time is now; the place is here; the world will be better when men and women are better. We are those men and women.

Our work and our lives are not yet finished. We have arrived at our present stations because of hard labor and effort. Is it not now time to review our lives and make those positive adjustments which will leave a legacy of honor and love, more precious than wealth, to our children, to our family, and to society? *Physician, heal thyself!*

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