

## A Plea for a Continuing Liberal Education in Medicine

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It is a paradox of our age that the advances in technology and scientific knowledge have not always led to a parallel increase in human happiness. Modern man lives in a world of plenty but remains restless, dissatisfied and uncertain of how best to achieve peace of mind. Left empty and unfulfilled by his preoccupation with material things and the pursuit of pleasure, the average man vaguely feels that something is amiss. Perhaps the source of this malaise can be traced to a faulty system of education, in which the humanities have been deemphasized in favor of the apparently more useful and more glamorous scientific subjects. Thus modern man is gradually losing the sense of continuity with the history of mankind, remains ignorant of the works of the great minds of the past and is unable to reap the benefits of centuries of philosophic thought.

A study of philosophy and literature is certainly not a cure for all our ills. It does however, play a major role towards the development of a healthy attitude of mind. It makes man aware of the universality of his problems and gives some indication of how others have attempted to solve them. "When I study" wrote Montaigne, "the only learning I look for is that which tells me how to know myself, and teaches me how to die well and how to live well." Neither does it matter that the conclusions reached by philosophers have varied immensely, from Candide's "let us cultivate our garden" to Omar Khayams "Cypress slender Minister of wine," from Kierkegaard's leap into faith to Camus' recognition of the absurdity of life and of the exhilarating liberation which this may bring. What is important is that the continuous exposure

to great intellectual thought cannot fail to have an effect on one's own inner development. Perhaps it may bring one a little closer to what the ancients considered to be the good life.

A study of the humanities is also pleasant. According to some philosophers it is the highest thing man can aim for. Aristotle considered the contemplative life the highest form of activity, superior to the pursuit of pleasure or of honors, an activity "thought to offer pleasures marvellous for their purity and their enduringness." Seneca also believed that only those people who take time for philosophy really live. "No age is forbidden us, we have admittance to all, and if we choose to transcend the narrow bounds of human frailty by loftiness of mind, there is a vast stretch of time for us to roam. We may dispute with Socrates, doubt with Carneades, repose with Epicurus, transcend human nature with the Stoics, defy it with the Cynics." Philosophy gives us pleasures and offers insights without which life would be a poorer one. For "are not the pleasures of the affections greater than the pleasures of the senses, and are not the pleasures of the intellect greater than the pleasures of the affections?"

Medicine, by tradition is a learned profession. In the middle ages, the medical curriculum at the Italian and French universities provided for a total study period of 14 years. Of these, the first seven were spent in the study of the liberal arts, only the remaining years were spent in the study of medicine proper. A similar program was offered by the early English universities at Oxford and Cambridge. This learned tradition was carried well into the twentieth century and nowhere was it better exemplified than in the life and writings of Sir William Osler. Perhaps also, nowhere is a well rounded education and imperturbable state of mind, (what Osler called

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Aequanimitas,) more needed than in the person of the physician. In his daily work, the physician is constantly called upon to make decisions which involve great ethical questions. Furthermore, he may better serve humanity if in his daily contact with patients, he can help them, by his demeanour and advice, to attain some of that equanimity.

The young doctor, in modern times, has been exposed to the humanities during his courses at college. Unfortunately however, as soon as he begins his medical studies, he will more often than not abandon such interests and restrict his reading to scientific and clinical matter. The large number of subjects in the curriculum, the modern expansion of scientific knowledge, the difficulty in keeping up to date and the pressures on the individual to do original research, appear to leave little time for other interests. The net result is that most students and young doctors do not take time to read the "great books." Perhaps, however, this need not be so. Perhaps we should recall the practical advice given by Sir William Osler, that great advocate of a continuing liberal education, who suggested to his undergraduate class that they should "start at once a bed-side library and spend the last half hour of the day in communion with the great saints of humanity." It is now well over 50 years since he wrote:

"A liberal education may be had at a very slight cost of time and money. Well filled though the day be with appointed tasks, to make the best possible use of your one or ten talents, rest not satisfied with the professional training, but try to get the education, if not of a scholar, at least of a gentleman. Before going to sleep read for half an hour, and in the morn-

ing have a book open on your dressing table. You will be surprised how much can be accomplished in the course of a year."

It has been said that the defenders of the classics are fighting for a lost cause and that the writings of the old masters have little relevance to the events of our times. It may be difficult to expect a generation which has split the atom and conquered outer space to be impressed by the virtues of a contemplative life and take to philosophy. Let us therefore recall the warning given by the philosopher Seneca almost 2,000 years ago, when he wrote about the shortness of life:

"For those who are oblivious to the past, negligent of the present, fearful of the future, life is very short and very troubled. When they reach its end they realize too late, miserable creatures, that all this while they have been preoccupied in doing nothing."

#### ADDENDUM

This is the list of ten books with which Sir William Osler recommended one should make close friends:

- 1 Old and New Testament
- 2 Shakespeare
- 3 Montaigne
- 4 Plutarch's Lives
- 5 Marcus Aurelius
- 6 Epictetus
- 7 Religio Medici (Sir Thomas Browne)
- 8 Don Quixote
- 9 Emerson
- 10 Oliver Wendell Holmes - Breakfast - Table Series

- - - but "there are many others."