Presidential Address

Fertilizing the Spirit of Hippocrates

WILLARD STAWSKI, M.D.
Grand Rapids, Michigan

MEMBERS AND GUESTS of the Midwest Surgical Association, I want to tell you three stories. Each story is true and each story continues to influence my life. I hope that you will find something memorable in them, too.

Old Barns

The first story concerns barns. My mother, who has already lived 90 per cent of this century, loves barns. When my family traveled about the United States, she would frequently point out barns and make comments about them. Sturdy, well built, and brightly painted barns that were obviously of functional value received little or no attention. However, barns that stood alone and appeared forlorn, weather beaten, and dilapidated drew her special attention. These barns have ramps that are overgrown with thistles and brambles and chicory and Queen Anne's Lace. Wild raspberry grows in gaping cracks in the mortar between the field stones at the base of the barn. The ramp leads to a huge hole that was once closed by a great door that hung from the rusty rail above the opening. Decades of weather and the weight of snow and ice have caused the roof to sag. Pigeons fly through the missing slats, and the stalls and pens have broken down. The pungent barn odor of animals and fresh manure has been replaced by the musty smell of dust and mold.

My mother used to wonder aloud whether a barn stood during the Civil War and what happened there. Did neighbors and friends gather to raise this barn and share their hopes and fears? Did young children swing on inch-thick ropes from a mound of hay on one side of the barn to the other? Who sought refuge here over the years, and what were they hiding from? War? Rain? A gang? She wondered if young lovers found solitude in this barn to kiss and hug and share their secret thoughts. She wondered why the barn was abandoned and why the boys did not return to the farm after the war. Or perhaps it was the great flu epidemic, or the drought, or the famine that followed that made it impossible for them to return. She told of young farm wives who died of "milk sickness" and of the large numbers of children who did not live to celebrate their first birthday.

Now, many years later, when I see old barns, whether from the expressway or from a one lane rural gravel road, or simply when on a cross country hike, these barns have special meaning for me because they have been hallowed by human endeavors and the cycle of life and death. So it is not possible for me to pass them like I do telephone poles or street signs, without feeling a special reverence for what I know must have happened there.

A Hunting Story

My second story deals with a college student and his grandfather who are hunting in a remote portion in Michigan's upper peninsula near Lake Superior. It is a cold day around Thanksgiving and there is more than a foot of snow on the ground. The two are in a small cabin deep in the woods. A single wood stove heats the building, and Coleman lanterns provide light as they play cribbage after hunting all day. Outside the air is crisp and cold. It is a clear night and the stars are bright. "What are they teaching you at the University?" Grandfather asks.

"Lots of things," the boy replies. "Especially how to measure stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Well, stuff like areas under the curve, the charge on electrons, how to measure the lift on an airplane's wing—that kind of stuff. In fact," the boy continues, "you have to be pretty darn suspicious of the things that you can't measure. What I mean to say is that if you can't define something, it would hardly have any worth at all. The professors tell us that it is important to be specific and precise."

"How about people?" the grandfather asks. "People are important. How would you measure them?"

"Gramps, you wouldn't believe what science can do today. Some of my friends who are in medical school tell me they can actually see images of the brain working and they are even taking apart the center of our individual cells and are identifying the very core of life and how it is passed from one generation to the next. Some scientists believe that our most deeply held thoughts and beliefs are nothing more than chemical reactions within the brain."

Presented at the 37th Annual Meeting of the Midwest Surgical Association, August 16, 1994.

Address correspondence and reprint requests to Willard Stawski, M.D., 1900 Wealthy, South East, No. 380, Grand Rapids, MI 49506.

"So then I take it you could pretty much measure what is in a human body?" asks the grandfather.

"Oh, sure; doctors and scientists already know the chemical make up of the body. I guess it's mostly water, and of course there is a lot of calcium and phosphorus in the bones, and the proteins, fats, and carbohydrates have a specific structure that can be defined and measured. So if you knew a person's height and weight and the percentages of fat and muscle, you could pretty much calculate and write down whatever is in that body."

"Is that all there is?" the grandfather inquires. "Is that the sum total of a body's worth?"

"No, I don't think so," says the boy. "There is more than that."

"Well, I sure hope so," states the grandfather. "Because I've thought a lot of what makes people different from one another, and why they like one thing more than another. Some people think that honesty is pretty important, and I know other people who believe that courage is even more important than honesty; and yet I am not sure that I would know how to measure either of those two things. And think about generosity and thoughtfulness and concern for others. I suppose there are ways to measure these things; they must be as important as how much you weigh or how fast you can run or how many correct answers you get on a test."

Mark Twain, Medicine, and the Mississippi

The third story is about Mark Twain, medicine, and the Mississippi River. Mark Twain loved the Mississippi River and he was perpetually in awe of that great river.

He had a remarkable appreciation for the history, the power, the beauty, and the possibilities of the river. His well known ambition as a young man was to become a steamboat pilot. His quest might be likened to that of a medical student who wants to learn "medicine," like Twain wanted to learn "the river." Each person realizing that at the very best, he or she could only learn a very tiny portion of what existed. Young Mark Twain, like the young medical student, struggled to master overwhelming detail, and more than that, detail that was constantly changing. He would learn about the depth of the river, the bends of the river, and the location of farms and towns. And when he had done that during daylight hours, he found it was an entirely different matter to negotiate the same stretch of river at night when the clues had vanished.

Twain's master, Horace Bixby, frequently berated his pupil for his ignorance and stupidity and lack of motivation. Every medical student has at some time stood in Twain's place when he or she has overlooked the obvious, or was unacquainted with what everyone else seemed to know. But gradually Twain did learn the river, and medical students do learn medicine.

One day, early in his steam boating career, Twain witnessed a spectacular sunset on the river. Beautiful hues of color and changing light and shapes in the river and on the river bank made an indelible picture in his mind. He recalled being bewitched by the sight and he drank it in, in a speechless rapture.

Can you recall the excitement the first time you delivered a child, closed a severe laceration, or removed an acutely inflamed appendix by yourself? Or do you remember the intense pride that you felt when a patient who literally died before your eyes later walked out of the hospital with his or her family?

Well, now imagine yourself on a steamboat on the Mississippi River on a moonlit evening in 1875. You walk with Mark Twain to the stern of the boat where a huge paddle wheel churns the river. Both of you sit down on cotton bales, and Twain starts to explain the realization that has suddenly occurred to him:

> "No, the romance and beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat. Since those days, I have pitied doctors from my heart. What does the lovely flush in a beauty's cheek mean to a doctor but a 'break' that ripples above some deadly disease? Are not all her visible charms sown thick with what are to him the signs and symbols of hidden decay? Does he ever see her beauty at all, or doesn't he simply view her professionally and comment upon her unwholesome condition all to himself? And doesn't he sometimes wonder whether he has gained most or lost most by learning his trade?"[1]

So there you have the three stories. Why did I select them? Because medical students and surgeons like you and me are just like river boat pilots. From time to time, we realize that the romance and beauty, the awe, and the excitement have all but disappeared from the practice of medicine as we attempt to navigate a treacherous clinical course for our patients.

How in the world can we recapture the indescribable and exhilarating sense of wonder and adventure of those early days of our medical careers?

Let me suggest one way, and that is to pay attention to a marvelous human quality—the quality of appreciation. It is impossible to measure the qualities that make each of us worth more than the ten to fifteen dollars that that small pile of calcium, phosphorous, and water and electrolytes that one body might fetch if reduced to its elemental components. But quality of the spirit is another dimension. And perhaps the most

powerful quality of the human spirit is the quality of appreciation.

What did your parents or loved ones appreciate for you? Was it the importance of honesty or the value of education? How about a Mozart concerto or the plays of George Bernard Shaw or a novel by John Steinbeck? Perhaps they made something very special for you that would go unnoticed by someone else—a crows call, a campfire, the smell of fresh clover, or an old barn. They invested something of themselves in those things and by so doing, increased the value and importance of that object for you. They noticed something important that others overlooked, and by their recognition and comment, you and I received a subtle transfusion of lasting value. The soldiers' cemetery in a small Pennsylvania village would be unknown if Lincoln had not appreciated the brave men, living and dead, who struggled there and brought that rolling farm land to the attention of our nation. And so, my friends and colleagues, you too can appreciate many things for your family, your friends, and your patients. Appreciate common things, the sunrise and the sunset, the power of a storm, the endless changing beauty of trees and flowers, and the frequently neglected qualities of our human spirit, such as compassion, civility, and kindness. These will grow in importance in the hearts and minds of those you love and serve; and because you chose to observe and comment, you have thoughtfully elevated something from the sea of commonality to a position of worth and reverence. And in so doing you have further enriched that great body of medicine for those who follow you, but most importantly, you have nourished and strengthened the unmeasurable, but infinitely more important, part of yourself.

REFERENCE

1. Twain, Mark. Life on the Mississippi. The Penguin American Library, 1984, p. 96.