

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

IDEALISM IN MEDICINE

GEORGE DAVID STEWART, M.D., NEW YORK

If a reason were asked for selecting idealism for presentation to this society a satisfactory reply might not be forthcoming. But as the ideals of an age give a measure of its achievement and its excellence so the ideals of medicine often indicate to what extent the profession is living up to the fullness of its opportunities.

What is meant by idealism: why is it demanded: to what questions of life does it present the answers: what majestic needs does it meet? What is honor? Not that bauble bought by wealth or granted by a king but the kind of honor for the keeping of which many a man has starved and died, often unknown. What is justice? Not that mere legality which courts and majorities can give and take away, which the rich can purchase and strong nations enforce but that righteousness, higher than human law, eternal in the heavens which brave prophets in every age have stood alone to proclaim. These are ideals, and their pursuit idealism, a term no one can define adequately but each in some way or degree as coincides with his experience or measures his aspirations. The humblest has somewhere in his personality ideals that make life richer; the greatest has only a wider range, a richer store, which may not add to his meed of satisfaction.

Idealism then might be termed the science of real values. While materialism brings us titles and lands and wealth, idealism tells us what these are good for, shows their relative uses, co-ordinates them, builds with them after an orderly plan. Where materialism treats men as tools, as machines, as things, idealism makes them heirs of God, co-workers with him, creators of beauty, heritors of truth.

Idealism turns all things into higher uses and nothing is common or unclean; there is no waste, no rubbish; whatever exists is the necessary material for the making of invisible values of manhood and womanhood. As the roots of the water lily seize on the dark, dead mold at the bottom of the pond, turning it into an exquisite thing that delights the eye, so in all the ages, however sordid and mean, it is idealism that has transmuted these surroundings into the wonder and the beauty and the glory of life.

If ideals are necessary to the art of everyday living how much more completely should they pervade medicine which deals with the pathos and the tragedy of existence. Medicine which takes as its motto the brotherhood of man; and as its maxim the doctrine of mutual aid and support; that agency by which men have lifted themselves from the cave to the palace.

Sometimes ideals are not kept in view and it is worth while taking stock to see how many are being cherished, if any have been hidden in a napkin, if some are becoming tarnished. By thus taking thought new ideals may be conceived or old ones refashioned so as to broaden the liberal intellectual equipment of the doctor, giving to him a fuller and more satisfying life; for there can be no doubt that medicine affords a combination of intellectual and social ideals beyond any other profession, its intellectual interests ranging from the simplest questions to the most profound, its social, offering a field for the exercise of the finest qualities of the herd.

It is a material age and America is said to be in a position of commercial supremacy, a dangerous peak from which it is well to keep clearly in view the rights of others. History teaches us that all nations in the past when they have risen to a certain degree of plenty and contentment begin to relax, perfection foreboding decay. Human experience has traveled a long and painful journey. It should not

be necessary to retrace the steps and one generation should profit by the tradition from that which has gone before. For when a civilization has fallen there is a break in the tradition and the Sisyphus task begins again.

General education on which medical education largely depends is tending more and more to the practical. One authoritative writer states that not only do the students in the universities demand practical training but that they would not understand the words liberal or cultural or humane if mentioned as studies that might be worth while acquiring. The terms have been vaguely used it is admitted; an illustration employed by a writer in a recent number of the *Edinburgh review* defines them aptly as follows: A man is shipwrecked on an island; his first care is food; his next shelter; and then if he is human he will want to explore the island about him; such exploration represents the cultural side of his studies and will be likely to cover the highest of ideals.

There is a fine story now grown old of an earthquake and tidal wave in Samoa, when the stoutest steamers were sent to roost with the carrion crows. It was told at a dinner of teachers; an admiral was there to make sure there would be a story and he told how the crew of an English war vessel drifting helplessly ashore cheered the crew of an American ship successfully fighting her way to the open sea. The chief topic of discussion at the dinner was the practical value—as compared to the cultural—of certain studies. One fine old college president taking the position that many studies were eminently worth while for themselves, apart from any practical application that might be made, used the story to illustrate his point, saying, "I would like to inquire the value in dollars and cents of the cheers that came from the throats of the doomed tars in the teeth of the booming gale."

The highest and finest ideals are of course acquired in the home, often unconsciously, and it is here that character almost entirely is formed. It is an interesting psychological fact that the ideals acquired in this way are most tenacious of life. But it is said that the home is disappearing; pulpits proclaim it and conferences are being held even now devoted to its consideration. In medicine, as elsewhere, character surpasses all scientific achievements; in fact, is essential to scientific success. No one can know the truth that makes men free unless he himself is truthful. Perhaps the picture is not so dark as painted but the home as a social institution is surely in danger. If it is true in the slightest degree that there is a lowering of ideals where shall we look? What is there to do that these may be restored? There are, of course, many opportunities of exercising idealism in medicine, in the home, in the hospital, by the bedside of the suffering, and the fact that the American College of Surgeons has created a new conscience animated by higher ideals is well known, but there are other contacts for the doctor, other ideals in which judicious investment will yield remarkable results. Books are a storehouse of ideals and fiction, the most constant thing in this changing world, is almost wholly idealistic. Lydgate, the doctor in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, sometimes quoted as one possessing the scientific ideal, believed at a tender age that while life was stupid, books were the stuff. His contemptuous attitude to life, which after all is the great book, cost him dearly when he selected an unsuitable wife.

Lydgate was not a man who possessed ideals so much as he was possessed by ideals, driven by them to think in great generalizations, processes of thought which have helped the world to travel far. Some men wish to know everything: Panto-phile Voltaire called Diderot and Hippeas the Sophist and Alberti the Italian might be classed with him. These store their own minds but do not give as much help to the vast majority of average intellects as do those who seek underlying causes or principles which group together isolated facts correlating and bringing them like a flock of scattered sheep to their own fold. Lydgate sought for the primary

units or tissues out of which the various organs were compacted and this hope of making an anatomical discovery actually possessed him.

The microscope, the author tells us, research had then begun to use again (implying that for a time it had fallen into disuse), adding that 1829 was a more cheerful and hopeful time for theorizers, observers and discoverers than the present, comparing the dark territory of pathology of that time to an America waiting for a Columbus. What a world—what an infinity of worlds made up of infinitely small things has been explored since those words were written and only recently despite the suggestion that there were no more worlds to conquer a new system, a new web has been postulated, the reticulo-endothelial.

Our earth has been explored, its rivers and mountains, its arctic and antarctic seas, and unless our machines may be made to visit the stars we are not likely to find more microscopic worlds to conquer but the microscope still has lands open to the explorer and bio- and physio-chemistry beckon with siren allure to the enthusiasm of the young.

There are many other practitioners in literature: the Country Doctor of Balzac; the tender-hearted, kindly Weelum McLure, over whom his friend prayed on the night before he died "Almighty God dinna be hard on Weelum McLure for he was never hard on onybody in Drumrochty; be kind tae him as he's been tae us fer forty year. We're sinners a afore thy sicht and gin he's dune anything wrang dinna cuist it up tae him, mind only the fouk he's helpit, the weemen and the bairnies and gie him a welcome hame Lord for he's sair needin it aifter a' his work."

There are some characters in fiction, doctors, whose examples are valuable in discovering to us ideals that should not be followed. A recent magazine article by a doctor contains so many strictures on his own profession that one wonders as to his acquaintances and can scarcely understand how he has escaped meeting at least one colleague of fine character: an integer small to be sure but yet enough to have saved Gomorrah. Arrowsmith, hero of the novel of that name, if he had possessed some of Dean Silva's kindness need not have been a poorer scientist and would have been a better man. Science demands from some of her votaries celibacy but that doesn't appear to have been a restriction of Arrowsmith.

Teaching, of course, is the greatest medium for maintaining and exchanging ideals. It is indeed a mart of exchange where the teacher should give much but often gets more than he gives.

The medical curriculum, crowded by new discoveries and cramped by the demands of examining boards, has become too rigid, leaving little time for the teaching of ideals. Attempts now are being made to correct this by allowing universities to themselves make educational experiments, disregarding to some extent *hours and counts*. It is to be hoped that room too may be found for a short course on the history of medicine, on epoch-making discoveries and particularly on great men. Pasteur advised young men to reverence their masters and himself gave an example by strewing flowers on the grave of one of his beloved teachers every year on the anniversary of that teacher's death. To learn with what difficulty new ideas are born and with what tenacity useless views cling to life is in itself an education both in science and humility.

Emerson says the spiritual only can teach—"not any profane man, not any sensual, not any liar, not any slave can teach, but only he can give who has; he only can create who is. The man on whom the soul descends, through whom the soul speaks alone can teach. Courage, piety, love, wisdom can teach. And every man can open his door to these angels and they shall bring him the gift of tongues."

The schools, too, might with great profit introduce the teaching of psychology particularly the laws that govern human behavior. It is surely a part of any higher,

education to be familiar to some extent with this subject, a duty of every doctor to be well informed. Paton, in the *Yale Review*, says "The advances recorded in making quantitative additions to human life will be something to be proud of only if, at least, an equal amount of attention is devoted to improving the quality of the human mind and precedes this with the statement that the recognition and prevention of madness is the chief question of importance now confronting civilization.

Why do men believe in such invisible things, things of the spirit? How is it known that justice, love and truth are worth more than all the visible wealth of the planet? Who can prove such a magnificent proposition? Well, the most patent truths cannot be demonstrated to the many who will not see. Who does not venerate standards higher and nobler than he himself perchance follows? Is not every successful man an idealist? Are there not hours when every man is an idealist?

No one can be forced to convictions; he must be led. We must for ourselves decide what ideals we wish to uphold, what things are good for us; whether we want the world to be a world for us, or merely a dream and a chaos. But this at least we must understand, that even science will fall asunder if we disbelieve in absolute ideals. Man picks his way in life, he selects the strands of his purpose from the multitudinous elements of a close-woven world of social and physical environments. He is free only to the extent of his purposes, where they are narrow and near, his liberty is limited but it expands with his comprehension of the world and is fullest when the better trend and tendencies of his time have passed into his life and become his intelligent will.