Knowledge Is Not Enough*

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It is my privilege as President of the American College of Chest Physicians to greet you tonight and commend you for the splendid achievements of the Missouri Chapter of the College. Furthermore, I am grateful for the opportunity of being with you—my personal friends—at this dinner culminating a day of scientific discussion. I will discuss most briefly some of the indeterminate factors I consider essential to the continued growth and progress of the science of medicine to the attainment of the ever-receding goal—health and happiness for man.

I have become conscious, increasingly and progressively, throughout the years of the inadequacy of present-day methods of education to prepare our young men for the present and future problems of life. I will talk to you tonight on the subject, “Knowledge Is Not Enough”. Let me interpret the word, “knowledge” as acquaintance, or clear perception of, facts, in contradistinction to wisdom which is the ability to judge soundly or deal sagaciously with facts (knowledge) in an endeavor to relate them to life and conduct. Intelligence may be defined as mental acuteness. It is pertinent to add that the possession of intelligence and knowledge alone do not constitute wisdom. We attain knowledge from thoughts of other men; wisdom dwells in heads whose minds are attentive to their own. A man may possess wisdom without knowing many things, nor even knowing them thoroughly, but possessing ability in choosing what conduces the most certainly to our true happiness and eternal glory. Tennyson has said, “Knowledge is earthly of the mind, but wisdom, heavenly of the soul”.

It should be the ideal of the universities to serve up what may be termed “solid knowledge”—meaning present-day facts, combined with efforts to promote individual thinking and to stress the objective of education is to contribute to life itself—not to selfish egotism and goal, alone. It is not the business of a university to serve gobbets of prepared essays to the end the pupil will absorb facts in a parrot-like fashion. The pupil must be taught that life is enduring and permanent and that knowledge with wisdom may be gained from history, inculcating in his mind the future lies before him, stressing that present knowledge, alone, is not enough. It is in such a manner true physicians may be taught to subordinate self for the future.

When did all this confusion start? It is my humble opinion it began with the establishment of progressive education in our public schools, aided and abetted later in our colleges. This philosophy teaches there is nothing fixed or permanent, and there is nothing to be gained from the philosophic observations of the past. It attempts to make oneness in the pupil, keeping the bright on the level with the backward; de-emphasizes

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the fundamentals in order to stress sociological subjects. It teaches results are pre-eminent, the means subordinate.

Have we forgotten that man is identified by the fact that he should be trying to decipher the meaning of things—to ponder the riddles of existence? It must be instinctive in man to be concerned with these eternal questions if he is to be identified as a man. I am positive each of us has a mission in life, and that every one of us feels or has felt it. The capacity for such noble feelings is in most persons a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences but by mere want of sustenance. In young persons it rapidly dies away if their teaching, training and professional influences are not favorable in keeping that higher capacity in action. They, thereby, lose their higher ideals and hopes, and then lose their intellectual tastes.

We are failing to some extent as teachers in hospitals, clinics and medical schools. We hurry our students through a crowded curriculum to make room for the next class. The student has hardly had time to get a good breath, much less have time to think. What a spectacle! At age six he entered grade school, age 17 started four long years of preliminary college work, was graduated in medicine at age 25, one year in a hospital, three years postgraduate training, and at age 29 he is a specialist. Hurry! Hurry! Such a marathon! Is he educated? Yes, superbly; with many facts, both isolated and connected. No lad without high ideals would embark upon such a long, long journey. Did we keep before him the proper sustenance, by our influence and individual counsel, to enable him to keep alive wonderment of the riddles of our existence and his instinctive concern of the eternal problems of life? He must be taught not only the right principles but he must be made to love them.

There is something infinitely deeper than the acquisition of knowledge as knowledge. It is just as true that we cannot depend upon the perceptions of our senses. And that thing is the search for truth which has no limit but Life itself. We are becoming bound down in our teaching and training by traditionally set formulas and the influence of dominant classes, who may stultify free thinking. Frankly, I revere tradition—that is traditional good—but all of tradition is difficult to rationalize. Criticism of tradition is not wrong; it will not cause the good to crumble. To my mind all traditional factors are good—even, perhaps if tinctured with some superstition—if they tend to produce insight and happiness into and beyond the present scientific progress of civilization; if the reverse occurs, I deplore it.

We cannot have a set formula for scientific progress. We must break the chains of oppressive thinking if we are to progress. You are thinking, perhaps, that if we break a link or two with tradition the result will be dissatisfaction with ourselves and the present. You are right in that thought. It is to be remembered one great element of humility is dissatisfaction with one's present status. It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. This difference of opinion is that the pig and the fool know only one side of life.
The horizon of the future is wide open for the younger men in medicine because the possibilities are in excess of the actualities. The thrill of the chase is his own. He must be taught that things not revealed to our knowledge may really in themselves be ambiguous, and that actualities float in a wide sea of possibilities.

I pray you will not gain the idea I am at loggerheads with science and scientific teaching, for such is not the case. It is my firm conviction that the man-made progress of the future rests with science and vision. And may I state, there is and will not be vision except with God. Although science professes to draw no conclusions but such as are based on fact, things that had actually happened, how can any amount of assurance that something actually happened give us any information as to whether things might or might not have happened in its place. In such a matter the wheels of chance may have turned one way or the other.

My express plea is that we must instill into our younger men a rationalistic attitude. Their minds must not be bound down and oppressed by the acquisition of facts, alone. Their minds must not be fettered by parrot-like teaching without philosophy and vision; they must be made to know the horizon lies just beyond. The necessity for practice and experience is mandatory—more clinic and hospital patients to observe. For it is only through practice and experience a theory can be tested. In such a way the physician can become a true friend of humanity with a rational attitude toward ethical, humanistic, and scientific observances.

I admit frankly, in closing these observations, that I am a humanistic optimist. Instead of visualizing man as nobly facing ultimate extinction of life and hope, I see man going indomitably on, despite recessions of error, toward an ever receding goal of increasing perfection.