

## The Shaman

What a glorious group you are! Fresh from the books and the teaching you come, clean-scrubbed, shiny new and filled with optimism for the challenges ahead. I have watched you evolve. You have given up the mean-spirited, grade-oriented competitiveness of your early years. You have learned to function as teams—each member contributing to the whole solution. You have met obstacles and self-doubt and overcome them. You have absorbed technology, procedures and an astonishing array of facts—both relevant and not—and you have become a class of friends, colleagues and peers—a group without gender, color or ethnicity—diverse in its parts but a wonderful balance of talent in the whole. You are the future.

Still, I worry, as mothers do, about the intangibles for which we have not and cannot prepare you. What can I possibly say that would reconcile the uncertainty of the medicine of tomorrow and your eager brightness of today? I look for a connection, a symbol, some bit of a guide that will illuminate the intangible I want to convey between our generations. For you are a generation after mine, but a millennium ahead in many ways. Almost twenty years have come and gone since my classmates sat in this spot. Twenty years of new knowledge and technology and data. And, before my class, other generations have received the hood and been called “Doctor”. We are related even further back into the recesses of time, for there have always been ill patients and for the sick there were always healers. We recite the Oath of Hippocrates and the staff of Aesculapius is our symbol.

I recently read Lewis Thomas’s new book. In one chapter, he alludes to an even older bond—he briefly recalled the ancient Shaman—the wise man, healer, delver into the unknown. Priest, medicine man, spiritualist. In this vivid image is the meaning I am trying to convey.

Leave this sunny spot and imagine with me a smoky space and the patient lying curled—in fear and pain—by the fire. As Thomas puts it, “...a glimpse of mortality shifts somewhere deep in the mind” of the patient. The patient needs hope and help. The Shaman is summoned. The Shaman comes—perhaps dressed in furs or feathers or grasses and mud to represent the forces beyond the human. He seeks the story of the sick. He listens to the tale of the coming of the affliction and its course. He learns the place of this person in the lives of those around him. He lays hands on the patient. Does he feel the pain? The fever? The pulse? The fear? Often, there is ritual—perhaps wafting incense, sand paintings, chanting, even possibly a trance. He consults his runes, bones or herbs. The fire flickers. The patient watches and waits and there is a new calmness—a resignation perhaps, but also a trust and hope. The Shaman has joined the patient to the wider natural and spiritual world of which we are all a part. He has taken on the patient’s pain and fear—taken it to himself. Their spirits are joined—but then they have always been the same.

You may wonder, “So what?” Nothing active was really done. No life-saving appendectomy, no miracle antibiotics injected. All the Shaman could do was listen, touch, counsel, connect. We can treat and save lives. We wear white coats; not furs. Instead of pouches of bones, we bring scanners and chemotherapy. Substitute body parts, ventilators and dialysis. Central lines, nutritional support, hormonal regulation. We have an appliance, device or instrument for every problem. We are an

improvement on the medicine man of old aren't we? After all, we live our lives differently. The way we treat death is different. Our patients expect more and we can do more. Medicine is not the same. Is it?

No, it is not the same but it is changed in its business and science and technology only—not in its art. Your medical careers will be in an environment as dissimilar from mine as mine from the Shaman's. Never have there been signs of such profound changes as we will see in the next decade. The time to get to know your patient will be replaced by crowded office schedules and paperwork and regulations. You will struggle to keep up with the new techniques and the latest antibiotic starting with a "C".

Yet one thing will remain the same—the patient will still call out, "Come please and help", just as the huddled figure by the fire did. So, even in the face of such a daunting future, I would wish for you a core of something more essential and more elemental than drugs and machines. For you, as well as for the patient, there MUST be more. And the Shaman in you is the answer—the mystic art of connectedness. For our predecessor knew what we have often forgotten—that we really know very little about science and that the human soul within us is the important thing to be found and touched and nurtured.

The humanity can be found in some unusual places as Richard Selzer, a surgeon, writing about "The Surgeon as Priest", relates when he describes surgery as looking for the soul:

"In the recesses of the body, I search for the philosopher's stone. I know it is there, hidden in the deepest, dampest cul de sac. It awaits discovery. To find it would be like the harnessing of fire. It would illuminate the world."

Or perhaps Hippocrates put it more clearly, in classic pithy Greek aphorism—"Art is long, Life is short." What I am trying to say is, to endure, you must practice the art. You must secret away the center—the humanness—of what you do. You do not treat "cases" or liability policies or insurance companies or politicians. You treat people—real people who ache in their psyches and souls as well as their bodies. People who need to be cared for. Remember them. They will be your talismans in the years ahead.

Each laying on of hands is both a profound privilege and an immortal, sacred ritual. Let this touching be the totem of both the past and the future. No managed care system can take that union away. Your patients will give you secrets—their innermost joys and fears. Keep them as a comforting but confidential mantra—silently chanted. CMS, MOC, the Joint Commission, EMR's—even the insurance companies--cannot mandate them away.

Savor each birth and mourn each death. This is the eternal renewal that makes the ephemeral changes of reimbursement scales pale in comparison. Let each life change be an amulet against greed and pride. Finally, and most importantly, like the Shaman, you must seek beyond yourself for a broader spiritual strength. Call it religion; call it Mother Nature; call it—like Obi-Wan-Kenobi and Luke Skywalker—simply "The Force"—but find it. Look for it in churches, in solitude, in poetry and always—

ALWAYS—in the faces of those you love. It will sustain you and is the potent magic charm that arms you in the fight against the devils of disease and death.

Again, let me quote Richard Selzer from his latest book, Down From Troy. He says it so well:

“There is something deeply moving about the human body waiting to be examined. Lying or seated, the body has surrendered whatever defensive or acquisitive posture it may have had and presents itself in an attitude of supplication...it is trust, not gratitude or worship that animates the physician. To palm a fevered brow, to feel a thin, wavering pulse at the wrist, to draw down a pale lower lid—these simple acts cause a doctor’s heart to expand. His own physical condition is altered by the presence of the patient. It is the sublime contagion of the diagnostic embrace. Add to this, the possibility of the grace of healing, and there is no human contact more beautiful...the patient and the doctor are alone with each other.”

And so, through the ages, the title is passed to you—to you who come today surrounded by the medieval trappings of academia, of gown and cap and hood, of pomp and circumstance; to you “Dear and Glorious Physicians”—descendants of the Magi and St. Luke and Schweitzer; to you wonderfully deft and skilled practitioners; offspring of Osler and Harvey and Vesalius; to you fellow graduates; heirs to Mulholland and Jordan and Dunglison; to you, the newest members of the ancient tribe of healers. I know you. I know you in my heart and soul. You are the Shaman. We are connected. We will endure.

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Opening Remarks

University of Virginia Medical School Graduation Exercises

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