

AN HOUR FOR MY THOUGHTS

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This is a slightly abridged version of the St. Luke's Day Lecture delivered to the Malta Branch of the British Medical Association on the 18th. October 1974 at the Medical School of the Royal University.

The proposal that St. Luke's Day should be celebrated in some special way, in this hospital named after the great evangelist, was first put forward by one of our late colleagues the highly esteemed Joseph Demartino. The Malta Branch of the B.M.A., which has for eightysix years flourished in our country, took upon itself the pleasant duty of organising a St. Luke's Day Lecture. I know all about the custom that this lecture should be delivered not by a medical man but by an invited layman because this was done on my proposal. You will wonder then why it is I who have been this year given the honour of addressing you and there is more than one reason for it. Mainly, to be quite frank, the organisers, who, as all doctors are, are always very busy, were this year exceptionally so, and they forgot all about it until the last few days. It is difficult to get a lecturer at short notice. People's wisdom must take time to be garnered and then to be distilled into those pregnant phrases which should pour forth like jewels from a casket and dazzle the audience by the brilliance of their corruscations. In view of this, the organisers thought the custom might be departed from if they could find a doctor who would undertake the task. Even amongst doctors it is not easy to find a more or less extempore speaker, so, in despair, suspecting that my vanity would not be proof against so tempting an offer, they asked me if I would step into the breach and, as you see, their prognosis was, in this as in so many other occasions, correct. I do not even find that being a stop-gap is particularly undignified, because I can recall cases, such as those of

Abraham Lincoln and Pope John XXIII who, in spite of starting under similar auspices, eventually pulled through on their own quite creditably.

There is also another and probably a more likely explanation, why it was I who was asked. The organisers probably believed that in asking me they were not really abandoning the custom of asking a layman since, in the view of some, bacteriologists are not really doctors at all. This is also something with which I disagree only mildly. Whilst I maintain we are medical yet it is true we do not thump chests or take a pulse and hardly ever even see a patient. This has the unpleasant side effect that whilst we work pretty hard yet it never passes the mind of any patient, whose illness we may have diagnosed and whose curing antibiotic we will have prescribed, to show any sign of gratitude and, when Christmas comes round, we always have to buy our own turkeys.

C.P. Scott, that famous editor of the "Manchester Guardian" once said, as you all know, that "Comment is free but facts are sacred". Cynical journalists have modified the statement to "Comment is free, but facts are expensive". So it is in science. Had I been asked to read to you a scientific paper, I would have needed much time to produce the work on which that paper would have been a report. As it is, I was told I could speak almost about anything and it was on this understanding that I accepted. G.K. Chesterton, in those blissful days when a book of essays could be and was sold for a shilling, once published such a collection and called it "A Shilling for My Thoughts". Realising only too well that time is money, I have ventured to entitle this talk "An Hour for My Thoughts". Of course I agree only too readily that it is presumptuous of me to expect you to be interested in *my* thoughts. I can say, how-

ever that most of what follows will not be really mine but the thoughts of others much wiser than me, which have impressed me and which I will be passing on to you. Field Marshall Lord Wavell once published an anthology of verse all of which he said he could recall from memory and prefaced the book by a quotation which ran: "I have gathered a posy of other men's flowers and nothing but the thread which binds them is my own". Perhaps I could plead at the end that I will have done something like that. As for charging you an hour of your life for this, it is quite possible I will relent and let you go at 55 minutes or even less — but one can't really call a talk "55 minutes for my thoughts". "An hour" is aesthetically more satisfying.

Several of my predecessors have thought it hardly worth while in their St. Luke's Day lecture to mention St. Luke at all. I do not quite agree with this procedure and I will pay my tribute to the master. My predecessors did not want to repeat each other and were probably intimidated by the belief that we do not know much about Luke but in actual truth we do know a fair amount and all that we know is to Luke's credit. Luke by the evidence was a man of heroic stature and not one of those monstrosities, creations of present day novelists, styled rather sickeningly antiheroes. He was a Greek and a physician whom Paul called "beloved". The evidence of his being a member of our profession does not seem to have been stronger than this assertion but the assertion is clear enough. Luke believed in the teaching of Christ and seems to have dedicated his life to the propagation of this teaching. He linked up with Paul of Tarsus with his very strong personality, and together they went on adventurous voyages. Although I have never myself been very venturesome yet my admiration is great for persons who believe in a code and are ready to endure great travail for their belief. I like doctors, I admire writers and I have a special interest in the art of painting. In Luke I find a combination of all this. Luke almost certainly wrote one of the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Many doctors since have taken to literature and in this they have been following in their writer which, in a way, is a drawback to

patron's footsteps. Luke was an excellent his biographers. Chesterton said that a good novel tells us the truth about its hero but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author. The poor writer will let his personality intrude too much and so it will become evident in his writings. Because Luke wrote well his two books tell us nothing about him except that he had a sharp, concise style and that he was accurate — both medical characteristics. It is, however, almost impossible to learn anything from his books about him. We know, of course, that his voyaging brought him to Malta and it was he who started the tradition of accepting our hospitality and then speaking of us as "barbarians". I say this only as an expected humorous touch since the word used did not then have its present connotations. The late Monsignor Knox in his translation of the Acts uses the word "natives". Such are the oddities of language that even that word has acquired special associations and fools could find it offensive. Luke will not have thought of our forefathers as anything except brothers in Christ and we have evidence for this in the fact that he painted a picture for them — a portrait of the Madonna. He always did so for his friends and many places round the Mediterranean revere the scanty remnants of his brushwork. Historians and art critics doubt the authenticity of such relics but then historians and art critics are cold blooded animals who would doubt anything. Luke would probably have been with Paul when the great apostle cured Publius's father of an illness which in the old version of the Acts was called "a bloody flux". In the Knox version it is "fever and dysentery" and may well have been amoebic dysentery. When Paul left, Luke went with him on a ship, whose sign was "Castor and Pollux" and they were together in Rome. Paul writing to Timothy says that Luke there was his only companion. Luke is said to have died, unmarried, in Greece at the age of 84. So you can see that when the late professor Albert Bernard named this hospital after the evangelist, as so many other hospitals throughout the Christian world are named, it was a fitting tribute to our visitor of nineteen centuries ago.

In the United States nearly every hotel

room has its own little bathroom or shower. There is also a plastic shower curtain which users are always asked to draw to prevent water splashing too haphazardly all over the floor. Once there was a great hotelier who had built a score of huge hotels and had been in the trade for many years. When finally he announced his retirement he was interviewed for the newspapers. One reporter asked him if, as a person of vast experience, a captain of industry and a leader of men he had now at this crucial moment of his life some message which he wanted to give to his fellow men, to mankind in general. "Yes", said the hotelier, "please ask them to draw the curtain before using the shower". Similarly now, having made my genuflection to St. Luke and being free to give to a more or less captive audience any message I please, I could go into a long talk about the submission of laboratory samples and the necessity of reading the pages about this at the back of the hospital formulary. You will be relieved to learn that my sense of what is appropriate removes any danger of my doing so.

One conclusion which it seems can reasonably be drawn when we think of St. Luke is that being a physician does not debar one from eventually becoming a saint. Luke was not the only one of our profession to attain sanctification and, indeed, it may well be true that to be a good doctor, a rather rare thing, one has in fact to be a saint all the time. I do not think that in any other profession are such demands made on one's patience and on one's moral strength. Still it is a curious world and we find ourselves these days quite often faced with an inversion of values and of standards. In spite of this, I still believe that there is right and wrong and that it is our duty to fight for one and against the other. One finds surprisingly as it seems to me, that there is nowadays no certainty about this and one is considered a little odd (which is a polite way of saying "stark, raving mad") if one insisted on this attitude. To illustrate the extent to which such distortions can be accepted by large groups, I remind you that the famous student revolutions in France and elsewhere of a few years ago started because a

student was disciplined for unlawful entry into girl students' dormitory. I honestly believe that one must be stubborn in supporting what one believes to be right. This is not being bigoted but being consistent. One must not be afraid to be considered out of date. "There are some dates", wrote Christopher Hollis, "which it is very good to be out of, and it is most possible that the present is of that type." To put it in another way, one must have principles and the courage to stand up for them.

Organisations which should have the right principles and stand for them in any country are the universities. I will concede it is not always easy to decide which principles are right and this is important since I am insisting on the obligation of supporting them but I do believe rightness or wrongness can be determined. What one must resist is being swayed by fashions. The vagaries of costume and such things are not really important. Within certain limits I do not care whether a student, male or female, wears his hair short or long. I say within certain limits because there are such things as neatness and simple cleanliness. Any medical student who dresses and poses as a tramp is a sham and a cheat because he is not a tramp and is falsely pretending to be something which he knows he is not. Still what one wears does not impress me much either way, but I am impressed by what a student has in his head and I want, if it happens to be my duty to find this out, to know about this and I still believe the only practicable way to find this out is by examinations well conducted. I believe that in matters such as these — no great matters of principle after all — the University should not allow itself to be swayed by whims and fancies. Only last May a team of dons and students at Manchester University, a 10-man working party which had deliberated for no less than 5 years, reported to their senate that the traditional three-hour examination paper remained, in their view, the best method of assessing a student's academic ability. This is not the sort of thing which will make one popular with students or which will heighten one's reputation as a progressive, but being popular or getting known as a member of the avant-garde is

not what a right thinking person should aim at. Talking of the avant-garde pseudo-intellectuals, by the way, I wonder whether you are as sickened as I am by the hair splitting and strategically highly dangerous antics of some writers in the correspondence columns of our local papers. They create vagueness, they condone the insertion of the thin end of the wedge. They forget the old Roman warning: "Dum Romae consulitur, Saguntum expuniatur" (Whilst in Rome we spend time discussing strategy, the city of Saguntum is being conquered. So never be fooled into a maze of thought which leads you nowhere. You must think, Kipling warned, without letting thought be your aim. Belloc pointed out the danger in a different way:

"Pale Ebenezer thought it wrong to fight,
But Roaring Bill (who killed him)
thought it right".

One other thing which I like to insist upon, and this seems to me a corollary of having principles, is a seriousness in one's work — the possession of a proper sense of accuracy and precision. Every week when I open the "British Medical Journal", I admire the reports of work which has been carried out as carefully and as accurately as is humanly possible. Perhaps it is only the best work which reaches the pages of the B.M.J. (and periodicals of the same standard) but to judge by this, one feels one must respect workers who are capable of producing such papers. I will say I have similarly admired many persons, our own countrymen as well as our occasional visitors from Britain, who have stood where I now stand and shared with us their hard earned learning. These people set before us an ideal which we should strive to imitate. It is along these lines that students should be trained. It is those of my colleagues who are so inspired that I feel I can respect. It is to such people that we owe debts of gratitude. Gratitude is, it seems, an outmoded virtue. But it is a virtue and to my mind virtues can never be outmoded. I am very much annoyed when I find gratitude to those who have taught us substituted by insolence and the virtue itself regarded as a weakness and misnamed servility. This is to be under-

stood on an individual and on a national basis. When a teacher opens his ward or classroom or laboratory or operating theatre to his students or to his colleagues, this should be accepted as a gift of high quality and received with gratitude. Sometimes it suits the books of demagogic politicians to sow dissent where there should be friendship and insolence where there should be respect. The man of principle should not swallow the bait however seductive the nationalistic flavour may make it. I detest the emphasis on the word "foreigner" when it is applied to some people in a certain special tone. People who have taught me, giving to me of their best unreservedly are not to me "foreigners" but my teachers, linked to me by a bond which I will not risk breaking, and certainly not because to do so will earn me the favour of some mountebank at the moment in power.

This matter is very much akin to another one which also interests me greatly but is, or should be, not contentious and therefore my views on this article, I hope, widely shared. This is the necessity that we in Malta should keep in good repair our links with Britain and also with the rest of Europe. I am constantly asking my students, on the assumption that they know English and Italian well already, to learn French (of which I have a scientific reading knowledge only). Since I want to avoid political discussions, let me make it clear that I am now referring only to cultural aspects and indeed to medical and scientific relations (although being, I hope, a man of principles I will not deny I think similarly on the political aspects.) Some politicians (in fact at this time both our main parties) play the game of inflaming national passions. My concern in this is that this should not be at the expense of our links with the outside world, the most important of which are with Britain. I am not in the least denying that we are Maltese and as such should cherish such things as our own language. Incidentally amongst a scientific audience it need arouse no passion to say that being Maltese or British or Patagonian or whatever is an accident of birth for which one should not be blamed and which does not earn one any merit.

The basis of patriotism is, in fact, a slightly widened egotism. Anyhow I for one like my own language and am pleased to be a member of the "Akkademja tal-Malti". One friend of mine with whom I fight, verbally, nearly every time we meet, once asked aloud how I came to be in it. The truth was that without my asking and without my knowledge, I had been elected to it because somebody thought I deserved the honour. So I do like Maltese but we must be careful not to allow such liking to cut us off from the rest of the world. Providential historical accidents forged our links with Britain and we are, and should remain, happy that we have become Britain's cultural ambassadors in the Mediterranean. Incidentally this should also be to our advantage and I appeal to doctors especially to see these precious things are not lost.

I appeal also, briefly, for a cultivation amongst our profession of what one could, for lack of a better word call culture or a higher education. We have now got to a stage (and apparently not only in Malta) where an O level pass in 2 languages, besides our own, can get one into a medical course. This is producing a type of doctor who has no academic background whatever. The tragedy is that when one does not know about something one does not realise what he is missing. I know we are all ignorant though on different subjects. Let us, however, try to be knowledgeable on some subjects, even on a few which do not seem to have any immediate relation with medicine. You may be surprised to find how closely related some subjects are and also how pleasing and satisfying it is to get to know them. Sinclair Lewis said (or, to be more accurate, he makes one character in one of his novels say) that the three basic books for a doctor are Gray's Anatomy, the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. That may be a little fantastic but the idea behind it is very sound.

So there are some of my thoughts, which have turned out after all to be more personal than I had thought they would be. I have ridden several of my own hobby horses and I apologise for this, though not, I must confess, very sincerely. When I was asked to speak to you it was hinted in a sort of undertone that this would be a

suitable opportunity before my retirement. I am very uncertain about this retirement business and do not think I like it very much. After all Clemenceau was guiding the destinies of France in his late seventies, De Gaulle was doing this even later, Adenauer presided over the resurgence of Germany at a similar age and Churchill was still Prime Minister of Britain at 81. One could quote several other instances. Under the present system it could be said that when a man really learns his job, he is then pensioned off. It is true that when one has been at work for several years — and I have been at it now for forty — one tends, not to lose one's enthusiasm, but to become a wee bit cynical and more than a wee bit impatient with the annoyances of bureaucracy.

My period of service has been a specially fruitful one. When I started as a nouseman at the old Central Civil Hospital, typhoid and Brucellosis (it wasn't even called Brucellosis then but Undulant Fever) were extremely common and quite often fatal. The famous mould spore had already floated into Alexander Fleming's laboratory. I was going to say through his laboratory window, but Ronald Hare, who was there at the time, assures us the window was so grimy it could not possibly have ever been opened. The Penicillium therefore was still being industriously subcultured until its hour of destiny was to arrive. Eventually the hour arrived and an Australian Rhodes scholar and a German-Russian-Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany got together a team which radically changed the course of medical history. Then there was the war and in Malta we lived though a time of intense medical interest. We did not have, not even at the height of the siege, any specific deficiency diseases, since we had learned how to prevent them. Many of my audience were not even born then, or perhaps some of them were at the time being fed on vitamin A, which was carotene mixed up with chocolate and spread on bread. We did have for a brief period non-specific deficiency diseases, or in other words, we were seriously short of any kind of food but it never came to anything like eating rats. Then we had murine typhus, unfortunately still with us but luckily not

too serious a disease. There was also plague and I was in it up to my eyebrows — a very thrilling period, bacteriologically speaking. We are now accumulating rubbish again; all the attempts to keep Malta clean, having been half hearted to start with are not even half successful so far. If plague were to turn up again, which heaven forbid, the rat population is large enough to create a very serious situation. In my time we have seen the end of diphtheria as an epidemic disease, so that to-day even the E.N.T. specialists have hardly ever seen a case. I was at Copenhagen when Fleming there met Waksman — the Penicillin man meeting the Streptomycin man. Tuberculosis, the long standing, versatile cause of so much illness was at length curbed. I have met many great men: Fleming himself, Chain, Waksman, Renè Dubos, Maxwell Finland, Paul Durand, Edmond Sergent, Twort, Bedson, McCartney, MacFarlane Burnet, Wilson Smith, C.H. Andrews, the great Sabin, and Sir Graham Wilson and W.W.C. Topley who were my teachers. There is no merit in this for me but meeting them has inspired me and I hope some of their charism may have rubbed on to me. I have seen the end of poliomyelitis as a killing and a crippling illness, one of the greatest triumphs of applied science. All this time the microbiologists have been very successfully working to put themselves out of business, but the prophet's job has very great risks. When everybody thought mic-

robiology had been played out the impact of its daughter science immunology began to be felt and the virology branch began to blossom most abundantly.

Looking backward I feel the microbiologists have a very great deal to be proud of. After bringing about antiseptic surgery, they created public health. Having curbed the wilder ravages of infectious disease, they have now presented immunology to the doctors to play with, not to mention various techniques to the geneticists. It has been a grand time, but in spite of this I believe neither that one should rest on his laurels nor that the future holds nothing of interest. On the contrary it may well be that we shall see as great triumphs as those of the past. There are still problems to be solved, such as the provision of more and better food for the populations which infectious disease has not wiped out. Perhaps microbiology by harnessing the metabolic actions of yeasts and bacteria and by the cultivation of yeasts and fungi themselves may at least for a time find better remedies for the population explosion than preventing there being a population.

I don't believe in looking backwards. The past is the prologue. The best is yet to be. Whether on the playing field or on the side lines I hope, by God's grace, to be with you for some time yet watching the great game being played, the game without an end.