

11

COMMUNICATION,

PRESENTED BY

JOHN McCALL, M. D., OF UTICA,

At the Annual Meeting of the Society,

HELD IN FEBRUARY, 1853.

Rept. from Jr. M. Soc. N. Y. 1853

COMMUNICATION.

Mr. President and Gentlemen :

Forty years' steady devotion to a man's profession, might, perhaps, be considered as entitling him to some claim to attention in regard to matters of experience, so far as regards his own personal examination and knowledge therein ; provided, always, that he be well endowed by nature with faculties of clear and patient thought, his intellect duly enlightened by a thorough course of sound education, and without prejudice or old opinions to be overcome before attempting an investigation into all the circumstances and facts of the case, which may come under his critical examination.

Such mental state and process would be just what would be needed to form a sensible physician, who, of course, should be moved and guided only by reason and sound argument, while the feelings, which are too often blind, should be kept in subjection to the understanding, a state of mind not always met with in these days of wonder and belief.

The question which was asked by the great moral teacher, "Are ye yet without understanding?" not, do ye believe thus and so, but "Are ye yet without understanding?" might, perhaps, with equal force and propriety be propounded to many now-a-days ; for it is to be feared that belief and credulity too often either take the place of knowledge and understanding, or, not unfrequently, go in advance of both.

Knowledge is, emphatically, power ; while ignorance is as truly weakness. But error is yet a worse evil. The illustrious author of that immortal instrument, the Declaration of American

Independence, regarded "ignorance as preferable to error." "That man," said he, "is less remote from the truth who believes nothing, than he who believes what is wrong."

Knowledge and sound understanding, with a high and enlightened sense of justice, are the only certain means of cure in such cases.

The science of medicine, like that of intellectual and moral philosophy, must rest on the truth, and not on the authority of great names. Its principles and doctrines must be carefully and patiently examined, in order to be thoroughly understood, and never taken on trust.

Instead of insisting on the exercise of men's perception and reflection, in acquiring knowledge of himself and the objects of external nature, his feelings are too often appealed to and called into action, while the understanding and reason are less thoroughly instructed, and thus poorly fitted for the great purpose of forming correct judgment.

The question too often seems to be, "What do you believe?" not what do you positively know of the thing or matter under examination?

And yet it is certainly not presumption to say that man is the only minister and expositor of nature, beyond which he knows nothing positively, and that he only knows of the rich treasures in her field of observation just so far as he has closely observed, whether of mind or body, and that more he neither knows nor can know.

Such is the method of slow, yet sure induction—the pathway to be sought for by every philosophical enquirer.

Now, if such could be the course pursued in all cases by physicians, their knowledge, though limited, as all knowledge must be, would be of the positive and useful kind, while belief and wonder would soon *fall far below par*, for the reason that a cart-load thereof could not disprove one positive fact.

I need not, gentlemen, trespass on your time to prove that the science of medicine depends on a thorough knowledge of the human economy and its relation with the world around us, and that such knowledge can only be acquired by personal experience and severe observation.

The day of system making has passed away, never to return, and the ingenious and obtrusive speculations of the school men have fallen, lifeless, at the feet of those two faithful schoolmasters.

The amiable and philosophical Dr. Spurzheim made a happy reply to the celebrated Mr. Jeffrey, afterwards Lord Jeffrey, of Edinburgh. When the Dr. first visited that city, distinguished for its learning and metaphysical spirit, and talent for profound speculations into man's nature, irrespective of the light afforded thereon by cerebral physiology, and while Dugald Stewart's philosophy of mind was in its full meridian, he first met Mr. Jeffrey in the hall, where the courts were held, and on their introduction to each other, Mr. Jeffrey inquired of the Dr. how long he had been in Edinburgh, and whether he had come to teach the people of that city his new philosophy of mind? in other words, phrenology; to which the Dr., in his gentlemanly manner, replied that he had come, not to teach, but to show, or let them know what he maintained on that subject.

The wily metaphysician said: "We are infidel incredulous," while the philosopher, as the Dr. truly was, mildly remarked, "Sir, in phrenology no belief or faith is required. The objects must first be seen and examined before coming to any decision in the matter, as in the investigation of nature in all her departments, for scientific truth."

To return. Who among us now refer to the systems or speculations of Boerrhave, Hoffman, Callen, Brown, Darwin or Rush except as things which have passed away before the light of experience.

In medicine, as in the other arts and sciences, some of its laborers will, of course, be in advance, for the reason, that they possess a higher order of intellect; in other words, large, healthy

brains, and the brain, too, in the frontal and sincipital regions, or have used, perhaps, their understandings to better advantage, by studying and examining for themselves, and not relying on the opinions of others.

No doubt the seeds of ability are naturally pretty equally distributed among men, and that the great difference in human capabilities results from the difference in use of man's faculties of mind.

To suppose otherwise would be to distrust the justice, wisdom, and goodness of creative power.

With these preliminary remarks I now proceed to the object of my discourse. The great law of intellectual progress, which is slowly moving mankind onward, in knowledge and useful improvements, has done much within forty years for our profession.

When I commenced its study, in 1807, I well remember the practice and doctrines of several of its most eminent members of this, my native State. I may mention the names of Dorr, Fitch, Allen, Hall, Livingston and Baldwin, of Washington county, in which I was born. Post, Kissam, Seaman, Osborn, Miller, Hammersley and Stringham of New-York. Now, though comparisons are sometimes invidious, it may be stated that those gentlemen who have now passed away were really the lights of the profession in the State in their day and generation.

Some of them were followers, to some extent, of Mr. John Hunter, others of Drs. Cullen, Brown, Darwin or Rush, while several relied mainly on their own experience, disregarding, to a commendable degree, the authority of great names, as well as several of the systems and dogmas of the schools of medicine, which were then, not as now, sufficiently "few and far between."

I wish some gentlemen among us, who have time and the means, would furnish some account of the lives and professional character of those good men, alike eminent and useful as members of the healing art.

Dorr, Allen, Post and Kissam were distinguished as surgeons; others as physicians, and a few as teachers of medicine; of this number were Miller, Post, Stringham, Hammersley and others.

Blood-letting, calomel, opium, tartar emetic, blisters, and a few other medicines were then used, as now, in several diseases, as the chief and efficient means of medication; and in most fevers and inflammations, certain fever powders, consisting of some of these items, with the addition, perhaps, of nitrate of potassa, &c., were much used 40 years ago, and even down to a later period.

I recollect of calling, a few years since, at the office of a distinguished physician, then far advanced in age, and seeing him preparing a parcel of said powders, I observed, pleasantly, "Well, Doctor, you seem to be furnishing a good supply of the fever powders." "Yes," said he.

I remarked, jocosely, that I had often feared that they were really fever powders, in other words calculated, in some instances, to perpetuate instead of curing the fever.

He desired to know when or where I had obtained that item of distrust as to their effects, manifesting, at the time, a little disturbance of his self-esteem.

Now, age and experience usually, and sometimes rightfully, claim the credit and consideration they really merit. And it is quite certain that opinions once formed and maintained to old age are not as easily thrown aside, under the conviction of their unsoundness, as an old worn out coat. In proof of this remark, I may mention, that few men of 45 years ever become reformers, or bless the world with new or useful discoveries, much less make any grand advancement in intellectual or moral science.

The improvements, whether in the arts or sciences, have generally been the work of young, independent and thinking minds. History assures us that not a single physician of the age of 45 believed in Dr. Harvey's grand discovery of the circulation of the blood.

The master-spirits of all great and useful works commenced, and often finished their task in early life. Such, it is believed

was the case with Galileo, Newton, Harvey, Priestley, John Hunter, Burns, Byron, Gall and Spurzheim, Bichat, Napoleon and Mr. Theodore Parker.

Now, after all, it is sometimes a blessed thing for truth and human happiness that man is mortal.

Liberty, freedom of thought and conduct have always been more or less fettered by those whose age or standing had too often given them, as commanding generals, an undue influence over the thoughts and feelings of the mass of mankind.

But death sooner or later clears the track of life, from all such obstacles to a knowledge of truth and the rights of man.

What could the world of thought do, without this grand provision of the All Supreme, in behalf of the great law of human progress?

As it is, bigots, fanatics, old fogies and their conservative associates must all pass away with their rickety notions and opposing prejudices before the light of scientific truth, to make room for the young advancing army of philosophical enquirers. But to our profession and the times. Now among the mistakes formerly made in our management and treatment of diseases, that of doing too much, and relying too little on the restorative powers of nature are facts pretty well understood, *now*, by thinking men, not of the profession. The healing powers of the human economy had been kindly regarded by some of the ancient physicians; but the fact that in many cases little or no medicine is sometimes the best medicine was only discovered in our day by the trials and experience of medicinal expectors.

The fact that the sick would often recover where little or no medicine had been given, became known to me in 1812, while surgeon in the U. S. army.

Our army was poorly supplied as to what was really needed, during the first two years of the war of 1812, declared against England; and especially so in regard to medicines and hospital stores. Hence economy in their administration became necessary, especially in the use of medicines.

In the treatment of disease, I commenced by giving very little medicines of any kind : and from thence soon ascended the scale, if I may be allowed the expression, by administering in some instances, colored mixtures, bread pills, &c., and in a few cases, with equal success. These trials and their results led me to think more favorably of the curative powers of the human economy. Now, gentlemen, it was on the shores of the magnificent Niagara river, while stationed in the army, and where the thunder of waters is always heard, that my attention was first called to consider whether nature or the physician aided most in the work of recovery, in these cases.

From thence I continued experimenting ; in other words, administering medicines sparingly, and relying on thorough ventilation as the spirit of life, cleanliness as all important, and an element of piety in the opinion of an old divine ; and strict attention to diet, as the grand curative agent.

In this way I soon found that even bleeding was less needed than I had supposed ; and yet the patients generally recovered under this course of non-medication.

Here then the barren and shallow claims of homeopathy could be studied and understood.

Nature aided, perhaps, in some small way, by medicines accomplished the work of recovery to health, and not the senseless means which only act if any sensible effect be ever produced, in such cases, on the ignorant and credulous minds of those thus deluded. But, my friends, some shame, if not blame, may attach to us, in having too often given our patients not only too liberal, but nauseous doses of medicines.

Such practice, no doubt, hastened the introduction of infinitesimal doses into dilutions, drops and spider's eggs, and withal taught us a lesson, which will not soon be forgotten.

This experience, sufficiently eventful, though neither wholly merited, nor yet ruinous to the character of the healing art, or the welfare of its accredited members, has, as might have been expected, served to embolden and imperiously urge the vis medi-

atrix naturæ to put in again her plea ; “ medicine me but little ; only give me fair play, and I will, in most cases, relieve myself ; yes, gentlemen, physicians do so, and you shall have, as heretofore, all the pecuniary benefits of my labors.” What condescension !

But, my friends, our noble profession, after all its trials and draw-backs, was never, in my opinion, in a more sound and promising condition than now ; and I feel assured that its course will be right *onward* and *upward* to higher and greater achievements in all its branches. I have no doubt that new and stronger light will be yet discovered and applied for its improvement and advancement.

From the very nature of things, the science of medicine, like the other sciences and arts, must be progressive, for there are new revelations constantly being made in all the departments of scientific search. The man of untiring observation and careful reflection, who examines for himself, and takes nothing on trust, must advance in knowledge and become *wiser*, and I should hope and expect *better*, too, as he grows older.

But rather unfortunately, as it seems to me, all laborers in the field are not endowed by nature with those faculties so much needed ; nor have they always had the necessary preparation in the way of education, consisting of instruction and training, required for the due enlightenment of the understanding and judgment ; or if so, it is to be feared they have not in all cases used or applied their capabilities to the best advantage in the pursuit of scientific truth. It is an old, though not always a true saying, that “ practice makes perfect.”

Too many in the trades, and some few too, in the professions, I fear still pursue the routine practice. Some men really revolve, as it were, in the same dull round from day to day, and from year to year, and seem hardly to have moved one inch ahead, in the line of new discoveries or useful attainments in knowledge.

Onward should be the watchword with all the sons of men.

Now, gentlemen, in addition to these desultory remarks, I would speak, had I time, of man's other and higher relations, and by man, I mean his mind as well as body.

In a word, his whole nature ^{is} ~~is~~ a domestic, social, religious, intellectual and moral being.

And why should not the medical philosopher be a teacher and expounder of all that belongs to human nature; not only of man's moral constitution but in the great subjects of religion and theology, as any other man?

And for the reason that the physician is, or ought to be, and might be, the best acquainted with the being man, said to have been created in the image or likeness of the divinity?

Now as no one hath seen or can see God, we must study his character and attributes through the first grand revelation made of himself, in his works.

And as man is emphatically le chef d'œuvre, thereof created in the beautiful, intellectual and moral likeness of the All Supreme, it seems quite clear to my mind that medical men ought to understand this great subject, which I have long regarded as the queen mother of science.

But, gentlemen, I forbear any further observations for the present, simply remarking that if these few hints, imperfectly presented should elicit one useful idea in behalf of man and our noble profession, I shall feel satisfied.

And now I have only to thank you, Mr. President and Gentlemen, for your kind attention and indulgence on this occasion.