

### Medicine as an Art.

PHILADELPHIA, April 9, 1900.

*To the Editor:* If we take from the medicine of to-day that which is art, we will leave, surely, not more than one-half to the scientists pure and simple—a class that would perhaps be more aptly designated as materialists. When the old-time writers styled their works on physic, “The Art and Science of Medicine,” they gave unmistakable evidence of their appreciation of this quality in medicine. With them healing was more than a science to be learned from books. Indeed, it comprehended so much more that was not to be found anywhere in books that great minds in medicine were earnestly sought after as preceptors. The relations between master and pupil were very like those that bound together master and pupil in all the other realms of art. With the passing of the preceptor there has gone out from among us a something that our present-day system seems not yet to have made good. Have we gained or lost? Who shall say?

Every art contains within itself known or unknown elements of one or more sciences. Drawing rests on laws of the perspective; painting on the laws of color harmony and contrast; sculpture on the science of anatomy; music on the laws of sound harmony and contrast; photography on the laws of optics and chemistry; and so on. Even good literature—as Herbert Spencer has shown—must conform in greater or lesser degree to the philosophy (i. e., laws) of style. There seems an indissoluble relation. Medicine has by some been placed among the useful rather than the fine arts; and yet healing has to do with nothing less than living and the life principle itself. Professor Griggs has said that of all the fine arts the art of living is the finest. Viewed from this standpoint healing rises above the level of the purely useful arts. Too, medicine is no mean art in its embrace of the major and minor sciences, most of which pay daily tribute to the thinking men of our guild. Other things being equal, the fullest measure of professional success is most likely to attend him who brings the various 'ologies to wait upon Nature in her allwise healing. . . . But he who would attain to the art must first grasp well the science, and then resublime it with his own personality. Then, and then only, does it become art. It would be difficult to say just what the materialist lacks as he essays a canvas, a bust, a bas-relief, a sonata, a sonnet. It would be unfair to say that he is wanting in color sense or perspective in the fundamentals of modeling, of the laws of harmony or of the construction of verse. Without these he is nothing. They are the cardinals of his work. What he does seem to lack is the Divine spark that, fusing all these needed things, rises above them and imprisons Nature's secrets, even the most elusive. With some—indeed, with many—this height will be attained only by the fiercest, the most intensive industry. But the man is none the less an artist, neither a genius because of that fact.

Equally difficult is it to criticise the medical man who brings nothing but pure science to his patient's bedside. He certainly does not lack book or laboratory knowledge of physics, chemistry, bacteriology, biology, physiology or pathology; neither is the work of his brethren in foreign fields unknown to him. These are the very tenets of his faith. Of things material he is easily master. But that is only half the proposition. This materialism reveals itself in the tendency to look on patients as so much flesh and blood; to treat the outer case—ment rather than the individual within; to forget that “we are such stuff as dreams are made of”; to take little thought of hereditary impress, prenatal influence, temperament, domestic and commercial status and a host of other nonmaterial factors. Any or all of these may produce all manner of perversions of nerve function. The insufficiency of such methods has been shown by none more clearly than by Weir Mitchell. Mind and matter sustain a practically complete relation to each other in the healthy human body, and the correlative of this quality in the body is the dual nature of medicine.

So, if the ultrascientist would realize the full measure of his possibilities, he must possess more or less intuition. He must have a genius for affinity—what Goethe called *Weltverwandtschaft* and Griggs “humanism”. It is really a species of telepathy. Discreetly used, it is the best and safest short-cut into the patient's confidence, without which we are powerless in most cases. This faculty of insight—of seeing the unseen—is what distinguishes the *artist* physician from the materialist. It removes him infinitely from the monger of patients who plies his profession for revenue only. It is difficult to believe there are many of these inside the guild. Moreover, if such there be, they are “punished, not *for* their sins, but *by* them.” Innate, instinctive appreciation of the myriad outworkings of human nature makes of the clinical worker at the bedside, the artist physician. Of the well-rounded man of science it makes a mental giant, a savant—the very flower of our cult. . . .

We to-day hear much of the *science* of medicine. It is not amiss to reiterate that, classify our knowledge as we will, there remains an outlying, an unaccountable factor in successful healing, the presence or absence of which marks the true physician from the medicine giver pure and simple. This is the *art* factor. The true physician is no less a genius in striving for perfection in healing than is the painter, the sculptor, the orator, the musician, the literateur, in trying to attain their highest ideals. The passion for perfection is the hall-mark of the true artist in medicine as in all things pertaining to the higher life. All art is one, and not least among its votaries are the priests of Hygeia.

WENDELL REBER, M.D.

JAMA. 1900;34:1144-1145

JAMA 100 Years Ago Section Editor: Jennifer Reiling, Editorial Assistant.