



“. . . for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.”

—FWP

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Sacrifice of a Human Heart

Anthropologists are known for being cultural critics and therefore are seldom invited anywhere, by anyone, for any reason. At times, however, we are asked to offer an opinion. In that regard, I recently received a note from a friend of mine—a retired cardiologist who teaches physical diagnosis at a midwestern medical school. His e-mail consisted of the following:

“Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart.”

— William Butler Yeats

“Do you think this contributes to [medical] students’ becoming hard-hearted doctors?”

The thought of a “hard-hearted doctor” intrigued me. It was sort of like talking about “misanthropic anthropologists.” They shouldn’t exist, but I know that they do. My friend’s question of sacrifice as a contributing factor to the development of a hard-hearted doctor carried my memory back to an example of sacrifice that I recall every time I hear the word.

In college, I majored in Greek. My professor was Charles Sector,* a tall, somewhat imposing figure, with a voice that for some reason always reminded me of John Wayne. As I parsimoniously squeezed a 4-year degree into 5 years, he would become my mentor, my protector, my counselor, and my friend. The relationship that began in the fall of 1974 would last until his death in the summer of 2002.

The Professor was the consummate teacher. I learned as much while walking across campus with him from the classroom to his office as I did during formal instruction. I learned that during the Second World War he had been a nose-gunner in a B-17 with the U.S. Army Air Force’s 8th Air Force. He was manning his gun on the morning of 14 February 1945 in one of more than 300 B-17s on their way to bomb Dresden, an act that haunted him until his death. But what does an 18-year-old do? The Germans were, after all, the enemy. It was an order.

When he returned to the United States, he enrolled in college on the G.I. Bill, majoring in religion and minoring in Greek, with aspirations of becoming a pastor. Atonement for Dresden? Perhaps. After college he attended seminary, eventually earning 2 terminal degrees, one in Greek, the other in pastoral ministry. It was at this point that he was invited to teach Greek at his undergraduate alma mater. He would remain there for 40 years.

In 1974, when I met him in Greek 101, I had no idea that for me the class might better have been called “Introduction to Life 101.” I think that he must have had a sixth sense that compelled him to pick up strays like me and help them along their way. His wife, “the love of my life” as he called her, was as gracious and caring as he. The Professor loved his students, and we loved him. When Mrs. Sector was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, long after I had graduated, it devastated all of his students, current and former. At the time, I was working for a pharmaceutical company in a large metropolitan area. The Professor and I had remained in contact through the years, and he knew that I had been involved in the site identification and initiation of several clinical drug trials. He called to see if there was some way that I could arrange for Mrs. Sector to participate in one of the trials for a new Alzheimer’s drug. Eventu-

*Charles Sector is a pseudonym.

ally I was able to secure an interview for her with the study coordinator, who would administer a battery of cognitive tests to determine which applicants would be included in the trial. Upon completion of the tests, Dr. Sector was called into the coordinator's office and told, rather unceremoniously, "She's too far gone for inclusion in the study. You should be commended for taking care of her for as long as you have. Most people who are in the shape that she's in are institutionalized." Mrs. Sector was sitting next to him when this announcement was made. On the long ride home, she turned to him with tears in her eyes and said, "Maybe you *should* put me in an institution." She lived for another 10 years. Dr. Sector remained her primary caregiver until his death from heart failure.

It was the Professor's habit to take Mrs. Sector out to lunch each day. When she became too ill to go to a restaurant, he had their housekeeper set up a special table just for the two of them. As her disease progressed, she knew him only as "the man who eats lunch with me."

The Professor's heart, as noted, was not in optimal condition. He had a minor heart attack during class in 1974, right in the middle of one of my translations of a section of the Gospel of Mark. He later assured me that my linguistic ability (or lack thereof) had nothing to do with the infarct. Fortunately for us, he responded well to treatment and was back teaching within a month.

While in for a routine visit with his cardiologist a few months prior to his death, he mentioned to the doctor that he had "a date for lunch with my girlfriend." The doctor, who had known him and Mrs. Sector for many years, said, "Charles. You do realize that she doesn't even know who you are, don't you?" "I know that," Dr. Sector replied. "She's been the love of my life for over 60 years. It doesn't matter what she knows." I spoke with the cardiologist at a medical meeting about a year after the Professor's death. Mrs. Sector had died 3 months

after his passing. The cardiologist said that during those days after his death she often inquired about "the man who came to eat lunch with her." She missed him.

So, in typical long-winded anthropological fashion, I return to the answer to my friend's question: "Does 'too long a sacrifice . . . make a stone of the heart?'" The question is contingent upon the person about whom it is asked. Hippocrates said that "where there is love of humankind, there is a love of The Art." If a medical student becomes a doctor out of love for humankind, he or she *cannot* become hard-hearted. The heart of a lover is a malleable extension of the person in whom it resides. It can be bruised, even broken, but it is never hard. It "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." If medical students don't love humankind, then it is inevitable—they *will* become hard-hearted. They already are. It is the inexorable fate of those turned in upon themselves—*incurvatus in se*, as the reformer Luther put it. Charles Sector, in the eyes of many, *sacrificed* nearly 2 decades caring for "the love of his life." It was no sacrifice; it was love.

In reflecting on my friendship with and mentorship by the Professor, I am reminded of another phrase from Hippocrates, from The Oath—"I will consider dear to me as my father, him who taught me this art." I caught just as much from him as I was taught. Charles Sector's diagnosis from his cardiologist was an enlarged heart. I could have told him that without a stethoscope.

Submissions for Peabody's Corner should 1) focus on the interpersonal aspects of a specific patient-doctor experience; 2) be written in storybook fashion; 3) contain no references; and 4) not exceed 5 double-spaced typescript pages.