Dr William Osler

Humour and wonderment

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When we laughed, we grew young.
Waking Ned Devine[1]

Dr William Osler, a physician born and educated in Canada, was the most influential physician in the English-speaking world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His career began at McGill University in Montreal, Que, where he established himself as a methodical teacher. His methods included developing rapport with patients, students, and colleagues, and careful observation and application of the clinical method to develop a working diagnosis and treatment based on emerging scientific evidence. He also began publishing his findings for a wider audience. His next move was to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia where he met Grace Revere, his future wife. (She was a great-granddaughter of the American Revolutionary War hero Paul Revere.) He began teaching his students what would a century later become *patient-centred care*: "Learn to study patients, not cases—individuals, not diseases."[2]

His hugely influential *Principles and Practice of Medicine* was published in 1892 after he became the Chief of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Md. Dr Osler personally supervised 8 editions of the text, which set the standard for contemporary medical texts and helped establish his honorific title, the Father of Modern Medicine.

The crowning achievement of Dr Osler's medical career was his appointment in 1904 as Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University in England. Recognition in the motherland is a big feather in one's cap. From a Canadian perspective, Dr Osler's achievement would be the equivalent of Max Aitken, the future Lord Beaverbrook, becoming a member of Winston Churchill's World War II cabinet, or more recently, Mark Carney's appointment as the head of the Bank of England.

Dr Osler maintained his prolific medical output but with that came the incremental demands of fame and family priorities. The latter responsibility is one that the famous often neglect. Dr Osler did not.

With this heavy load, I have wondered, how did he cope?

Mature coping mechanisms

Before the late 1930s, medical research concentrated on resolving conditions causing disease and death. At that time, a Harvard study was started by Dr Arlie V. Brock to systematically look at the kinds of people who were well and did well and the characteristics that were associated with their positive outcomes. The philanthropist William T. Grant funded the study, which became known as the Grant Study of Adult Development.[3] Healthy men from consecutive Harvard University classes were recruited and their medical and psychological parameters were followed in a longitudinal study. The director of the study in 1995 was Dr George Vaillant, who published the collected data in his book, *Adaptation to Life*. Dr Vaillant pointed out that not everyone in the study "lived happily ever after,"[3] but those with happy, healthy, productive lives had some or all of the following 4 mature coping mechanisms: altruism, suppression, anticipation, and humour.[3]

Humour and wonderment

Igor Stravinsky said that he did not understand his music, he felt it. Humour is sort of like that; it is easily recognized and categorized but its nuances are difficult to comprehend. We accept notions such as, "When we laughed, we grew young."[1] It is a catchy comment, but does it contain levels of understanding of which we are totally unaware?

Osler was a humour practitioner. He started out as a practical joker—"geese in the classroom"[2]—but over time he refined his humour and he grew to know how it affected others and how he was affected by it. He felt it. He used mostly whimsy and incongruity but on another level he also observed "the foibles, vanities and ambiguities of the human personality,"[4] which is considered the highest form of humour by humour scholars.

You probably would not see wonderment on any list of humour types, but wonderment does have some things in common with humour: it is easily recognized, its nuances are appreciated but not readily understood, and like humour, it is felt. Everyone is familiar with the feeling—to marvel, to be amazed. Rachel Carson wrote about the phenomenon based on her exploration of the Maine coast with her 3-year-old grandnephew. Carson believed, "If a child is to keep alive an inborn sense of wonder ... [he or she needs] the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."[5] Osler believed this too. He was also a wonderment practitioner.

Dr Osler and wonderment

Michael Bliss, the eminent Canadian historian and an

authority on Osler, had this to say about Osler's interaction with children.

> Nothing struck me more forcibly about the beauty of Osler's personality than the magic he could generate with little children. It shines in scores of wonderfully whimsical, loving notes and in dozens of anecdotes and memoirs. He was a man who would have stood out, did stand out, in any crowd—except that he had a habit of disappearing from crowds to find some children to play with.[2]

Wilder Penfield, an outstanding student and athlete at Princeton University in New Jersey, had been awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford University at the outbreak of World War I. Penfield described his initial reception in Oxford as follows. "My introduction to the Dons of my college had been a particularly chilling experience and my fellow students had completely ignored me."[6] Then he was invited to Osler's home.

> Lady Osler came forward with a smile that said welcome. "Sir William [Osler was created a baronet in 1911] is over there on the floor." A young medical officer was stretched out on the floor and Sir William was on his knees bandaging up an imaginary wound with his pocket handkerchief to the ecstatic applause of two little children. They called the kneeling man William and he was evidently a beloved companion. He got up and came to meet me laughing.[6]

In 1911, Dr Osler had taken a vacation. His older brother Edmund had organized a 6-week trip up the Nile River on the Thomas Cook and Son riverboat *Seti*. (Edmund Boyd Osler was a prominent Canadian financier and at the time of the trip was a Member of Parliament for Toronto West and President of the Dominion Bank of Canada.) Osler had very much wanted his wife, Grace, to join him but she disliked heat and wanted to keep an eye on their teenaged son, Revere. The correspondence that resulted gives us a good look at Osler's use of wonderment and humour.

At Giza, Osler wrote,

> I got a splendid answer from the Sphinx in front of whom I stood just at sunset in a splendid glow of light, and as I sat in the sand and gazed and gazed and wondered and wondered—what do you suppose peeped over the very top in full radiance—the evening star, symbol of hope & love. It really startled me—but was it not a good answer of the riddle of existence?[7]

Rachel Carson observes that the "child's world is fresh and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement,"[5] but regrets that the gift is "dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood."[5] At the age of 62, Dr Osler had no difficulty accessing his senses of wonder and humour. On his arrival in Egypt, Osler gave Grace a medical update: "I am better this eve, just a slight schnupfen."[7] Of all the languages to describe a head cold, the German word *schnupfen* says it best. He signed 3 of the 27 letters to Grace, "Egerton Yorrick Davis," a pseudonym Osler used when he was writing humour. In 2 of the letters Osler referred to "Ike," a nickname for his son, Revere. Osler used juvenile exclamations such as "gee whiz" and "gee whiz muz" to express how he missed his wife and, "I wish you could have tasted the cake for tea—yum yum."[7] He wrote Grace, "I am furious you are not here, I have no one to squeeze. I cannot squeeze my blood relatives and Elsie B. is too thin."[7] How's that for complementary thwarted yearning? Grace wrote a letter worrying about Revere, and Osler responded, "[The] dear Lad, please don't worry that boy will come out all right—good health—sweet disposition, hang the brains, they might only get him in trouble."[7] On arriving at the temple of Karnak, Osler wrote, "Heavens what a place it must have been. There is nothing to be compared with it built by human hands. St. Peters could go in one section."[7]

Osler returned from his Nile trip refreshed and resumed his busy schedule.

World War I

The Oslers were not exempt from the devastating effects of World War I. Revere Osler was mortally wounded at Passchendaele in 1917, age 21. The Oslers grieved but carried on. In the fall of 1919 Sir William traveled to Edinburgh, Scotland, to talk about medical research grants. He developed an upper respiratory tract infection (possibly Spanish influenza) on his return trip. In Oxford the infection turned to pneumonia, then a lung abscess. The finest physicians and surgeons of the day attended him. A thoracentesis was done and this was followed by general anesthesia and surgical drainage of his lung. The procedures did not halt his gradual deterioration. During this time he wrote letters and a book review, and entertained his visitors by telling them about his daily excursions in bed. Even his regrets were whimsical: "How I should have liked to get drunk with Charles Lamb."[2] Sir William Osler died on December 28, 1919.

Lessons and legacy

One measure of health is "behaviour unaffected by conflict."[3] We do know that William Osler had a very busy, productive life. During his career he showed no signs of burnout, disenchantment, or preoccupation with things that did not matter. He did have stressors and conflicts, but they did not seem to affect his behaviour. We know that he had a well developed sense of humour and wonder, and that he frequently revisited the world as seen

through the eyes of children. Michael Bliss said, "with children, Osler had Lewis Carroll's sensibilities without his peculiarities."[2] Dr Osler had mature coping skills.

How did William Osler come to develop his skills with humour and wonderment? We do know that his parents were playful and loving and that he was raised in a parsonage "on scripture, daily family prayers and two or three church services a week."[2] Along with mentoring from his family, perhaps Mark 10:14 was a scriptural lesson that had meaning and application: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God."

Dr Osler has legacies in a number of domains. Does he have a legacy in humour and wonderment? He taught Wilder Penfield, who returned to Montreal where Osler began his career. Dr Penfield was the first neurosurgeon in Montreal and was the founding director of the Montreal Neurological Institute. He in turn taught William Feindel, the third director of the Montreal Neurological Institute. Dr Feindel was an inveterate joker and used humour to defuse everything from interhospital rivalries to fights among his children. His son Chris remembers, "One night we were all behaving really badly at dinner and my Dad quietly poured a bottle of ketchup over his head."[8] Dr Osler's humour and wonderment legacy continues.

Dr Osler allowed humour and wonderment to be part of everyday life, not to detract from it but to give it a balanced and fresh perspective.

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Competing interests
None declared

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