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Presidential Address

Flight from Chauvinism*

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IT IS INDEED a singular honor and privilege to address this most august assemblage, members of the American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons, and distinguished guest from across the seas, members of the Section of Proctology of the Royal Society of Medicine, and members of the Section of Colonic and Rectal Surgery of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons who have travelled some 3,000 miles from the east and 10,000 miles from the west to participate in this 75th anniversary meeting.

The president of an organization who by tradition is asked to deliver a presidential address has a built-in, perhaps unfair, ad-

vantage. Regardless of the topic he has chosen to present, he is, because of respect for the office he holds, assured of an audience. This is good and this can be bad. This is good for him because the topic and the subject matter he presents do not have to be submitted to a program chairman and his committee for prior approval or likely rejection. It may be bad, not for him, but for the audience, who perhaps must patiently and politely wait for the last, long, drawn-out sentence. I will try to spare you this.

It has been my great privilege and pleasure to have visited many of you in your hospitals and clinics in this country and abroad, and to have enjoyed the hospitality of your homes. The opportunity also has been afforded me to visit and observe medical care and surgery in countries not represented here today on both sides of the so-called "iron curtain" and on both sides of the earth. And I would say to you that

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the hospitality, sincere cordiality, and scientific interest are everywhere the same, not affected by oceans, by deserts, or by man-made boundaries. All whom I have visited have humbled me in some measure, and all have taught me something that was new to me.

And so with this background, which is in no way unique to me, I have chosen the topic of my brief presentation.

From the days of our early childhood we all quickly develop a pride, a pride in our parents, a pride in our families, and as we grow we strive to justify a pride we would like to have in ourselves. We mature and become aware of the faults in all our surroundings. We nonetheless, in the normal course of events, develop a justifiable pride in our country and in our institutions. As surgeons we are proud of the institutions in which we trained, and of the hospitals, clinics and universities where we now work. We all are proud and should be proud of our own personal skill in whatever branch of medicine or surgery that we have chosen as our field of endeavor.

However, this admirable pride is easily self-destructing. Insidiously, our way becomes the best way. Our way becomes the only way. Preach the gospel of our way; no need to consider any other.

We forget the backgrounds, the cultures, and the heritages of other countries, other institutions, and other individuals. All are important factors that affect their thinking and their logical courses of action.

Thus, pride to excess becomes self-defeat-

ing, afflicting us first with a slightly blurred vision, progressing to tunnel vision, and finally becoming total blindness as we while away our time and we wither and waste to naught in our own little self-centered, constricting cocoon. Pride to excess is a syndrome of self-indulgent narcissism, in a word, chauvinism.

From personal experience I know that it is mainly in the early years of our careers, following our formal training, that we are inclined to be unduly impressed by our own knowledge and expertise. This is before we have had the opportunity to develop the broader perspective gained by the observation of others and discussing problems with them. The younger surgeon early in his career should discipline himself to visit medical centers and scientific meetings even at the seeming sacrifice of time and monetary loss. All of us are inferior in some measure to everyone else. All can learn something from everyone. No one person or one institution has a monopoly on knowledge. Knowledge is the one commodity that is limitless.

And so this meeting of truly international scope affords us the opportunity to take flight, to soar above the shackles of petty, provincial chauvinism. To quote Alexander Pope,¹

"A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring."

Reference

1. Pope A: An Essay on Criticism. 1688-1744, line 215