

A Cynical Fable

Leonard Tushnet, M.D.



Once upon a time, there was a young man whose family wanted him to be a physician. The young man, who was a dutiful son and anxious to avoid the draft, therefore, entered a premedical course at the university.

After five years, he received a Bachelor of Science degree; he had taken a year off for cultural study in Europe. There he discovered that what they say about women of the Orient is not true, that what they say about Swedish girls is true, and that broadmindedness does have its virtues.

The young man then entered medical school. Because of the shortage of physicians and the faculty's resultant need to pass everyone, he did not find the course of study onerous. In due time, five years later, the young man was graduated with the degree of M.D. The extra year, to widen his horizons, he had spent with various peace missions in those benighted African countries just emerging into the dawn of Western civilization and its concomitant diseases. The year further broadened his knowledge of non-American cultures. He learned that being poor is worse than being rich, that English is more widely understood than Xhosa, and that flush toilets are not a necessity.

The young man then entered upon an internship that was to prepare him for the exigencies of actual medical practice. Here he learned that emergency-room ser-

vice means the treatment of the common cold, that illegible handwriting prevents callings-down for errors in charts, and that laboratory tests save wear and tear on brains.

On the completion of his internship, the young man, being very patriotic and having no other recourse, undertook his military duties. Because he was highly trained and an officer, he spent two years at a military post, at which he okayed treatment given by the master sergeant of his detachment, gave lectures on the dangers of venereal (as opposed to martial) combat, and learned the extraordinary serviceability of the third person, passive voice, and subjunctive mood in writing reports.

His Own Medicine

He was then ready for a residency. Not fond of blood and bored by physical examinations, the young man decided to become a psychiatrist, psychiatry also being a branch of medicine that requires no great outlay for equipment. He took up a residency in an ultramodern psychiatric hospital complete with computers for fudging statistics, a pharmacy full of psychotropic drugs of unknown menace, and beautifully decorated open wards with the most cleverly disguised restraints. The hospital had a steady inflow of the mentally weak and halt. It also had an equally steady outflow of the same, in order to maintain its reputation as an up-to-date institution with neither back wards nor simple custodial care, but a place that specialized in active therapy. The young man was taught that cold baths, colectomies, lobotomies, and shock

LEONARD TUSHNET is a retired General Practitioner in Maplewood, New Jersey

treatments were antiquated and harmful. He was so well indoctrinated with psychopharmacologic propaganda that, on the completion of his residency, he was unprepared for the news that in order to be a successful psychiatrist he needed a thorough analysis of his own psyche.

Having during this time married and, therefore, being in need of money, the man (young now only by courtesy) entered practice while he underwent analysis. Of course, aware of his limitations, he treated only psychotics and neurotics. He spent most of his free time giving lectures (unbolstered by such trivia as facts) to lay groups on the great advances made in the field of psychiatry. These lectures, he was told by his older and presumably wiser colleagues, were ethical means of publicizing his name and qualifications and thus of increasing his practice. His advisers were correct. The man was soon able to provide his family with the necessities of daily living commensurate with his status: a large house, several cars, private schools for his children, expensive jewelry for his wife, and country-club memberships for himself.

Compensation

Meanwhile, the man went on with his analysis. Faced with the range from orthodox to radical—from the phylacteries of the Freudians to the nudity of the neo-existentialists—the man (an educated consumer) made the "best buy," an analysis of moderate length and of little cost.

The analysis resulted, first, in his developing insights into his charac-

ter, and, second, in making strong defenses against the defects he uncovered. He learned humility by finding he was not so smart as he thought he was; he coped with that by boasting, in papers read before medical associations, of his therapeutic successes. He learned that his goals were as limited as his capabilities; he surmounted that knowledge by raising his fees, to prove his worth and the value of his ambitions. He recognized his egocentricity; he overcame it by mock-modest disclaimers of credit for his increased activities in community affairs.

Because of his professional attainments and his civic activities, by the time the man had reached the end of middle age, he was frequently called on to give his opinion on subjects which affected the lives of his fellow-citizens: the mental capacities of Presidential nominees, the prophylaxis of teen-age drug use, and the relative values of varying educational theories. He became known as an expert, appearing before Congressional committees, testifying in court cases, and being a TV panelist.

At the dinner given him on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his starting practice, the man responded to the toasts by a statesmanlike speech critical of the rising generation, who were departing from the basic virtues of integrity, honesty, and self-discipline, who foresook peaceful reform for riot in the cause of revolution, and who refused to benefit from the painfully acquired (through experience) wisdom of their elders.

END

