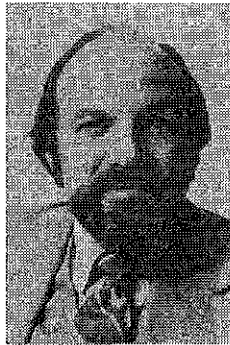


Editor's Page

On Giving And On Getting

My sixteen year old daughter was just appointed to a city-wide commission to represent her high school in a joint effort to plan and implement a program that aims at improving reading and other basic skills of high school students. The very need for such a program is a sad commentary on our society and on its educational system, which allows students to be promoted and to be passed from grade to grade merely on the basis of being registered, sometimes even without minimal attendance and often without demonstrating that the class curriculum has been mastered. Various explanations are usually offered for such questionable practices, but they are all irrelevant to the process of learning. As a result, many high school graduates can barely read and cannot write even a simple sentence.



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The appointment was an honor, which my daughter was very happy about and which pleased me, too. So it troubled me when I learned that she would be compensated for her time and efforts. The Federal government, I discovered, is backing and financing the project, and its predictable approach generally equates expenditure of funds with the achievements of desirable results. Time was when school systems were representative of, and responsible to, local communities of which they were part, supported by them and reflecting their values. The long arm of Big Brother, in the form of the Federal government, is increasingly reaching directly into our backyards, and with the power of its dollars it determines, in effect, the content of the educational system as well as the standards of medical practice. Even a sixteen year old wondered why she was being paid, since she was happy to volunteer her services without remuneration.

Volunteerism is quickly dying altogether. Even within Medicine. Physicians are not any greedier now than they used to be in the past, but they are being paid by Medicare and by Medicaid for work which they customarily rendered without a fee. The image of the physician has been tarnished in the process, and he is now often portrayed as a self-seeking, insensitive high-earner. Even some of the younger physicians hardly remember that medicine is not simply a good way to make a living. Everyone in this society seems dissatisfied and wants more, although even the poor among us are by far better off than they have ever been at any time in the past. Promises made repeatedly by politicians eager to be elected have succeeded in raising and then escalating the levels of expectation, and large segments of our population now demand to be taken care of from cradle to grave, as if this were a natural right.

Physicians used to volunteer some of their time not only for the care of the needy, but also for the teaching of medical students, without expectation of rewards, other than the satisfaction of doing what is proper and right. So old is this tradition, in fact, that it constitutes one of the elements of the Hippocratic oath:

"I will look upon him who shall have taught me this Art even as one of my parents. I will share my substance with him, and I will supply his necessities, if he be in need. I will regard his offspring even as my own brethren and I will teach them this Art, if they would learn it, without fee or covenant. I will impart

this Art, by precept, by lecture and by every mode of teaching, not only to my own sons but to the sons of him who has taught me, and to disciples bound by covenant and oath according to the Law and Medicine."

Things are markedly different these days. After participating in a Continuing Medical Education program recently, the chairman handed me a sealed envelope which I did not expect, need or desire. It contained a check for my time which I, like my daughter, was willing to offer freely. The mushrooming C.M.E. programs, so popular these days because of the new requirements for re-licensure, are in fact rapidly becoming politically tinged, big business and money-making devices, more so than they are means for improving the quality of practice.

The old legend of the two brothers speaks of different values, more common at a different and saner age. Tilling the land left to them by their father, the brothers shared equally of the fruits of their toil. One dry year, when their harvests were meager, each of them was worrying about the welfare of the other. Said the single one to himself: "My brother has a wife and children, all of whom must be fed and must be clothed. It is not right for me to take as much as he does, just for myself alone." Said the other: "I have a wife and a family to give me solace when I'm hungry and cold. My brother has no-one to warm his heart or body. It is not right for me to take as much as he does, since he is all by himself alone." And so, after darkness descended on earth, each of the brothers secretly loaded a heavy sack of his grain on his shoulders, and slowly carried the precious load to his brother's house.

As they met in the middle of the road between their houses, they recognized each other, fell into each other's arms and cried with full hearts.

And the Lord, concludes the legend, sitting on high, saw the embracing brothers, crying with love, and designated that spot to build a temple on.

John Kennedy also understood that the universal wish to always be given is incompatible with the continued existence of society. "The New Frontier . . . sums up not what I intend to offer the American people, but what I intend to ask of them."

The materialistic belief that assumes that the more we get the greater our joy was introduced in the name of raising the standards of living of the poor. It is currently the basis for most public policy decisions. In reality, happiness may be achievable more by giving of one's self than by getting. All are impoverished by innovations that regard human interactions exclusively or basically in terms of buying and selling. It is tragically odd that those who push such changes call themselves "liberals," and that they do so in the name of expanding human dignity and furthering the "good life." The very opposite may well be true.

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