Speaking for Myself

Reading for doctors

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Why should one read? A question rarely asked; tacit, nevertheless, in the low priority given to reading, in the assumption that it is a ‘time-pass’. But, after a life-time of reading, I have no problems giving the answers: because reading opens up spaces, windows and doors not only to the outside world, but to the world within us as well. Because it makes us see familiar things in a new light and makes strange worlds familiar. For doctors especially, who have to deal with humans so much and so often in times of crises, seeing the inner landscapes of people through the lens of a writer’s imagination can offer some penetrating insights and provide what I can only call an additional working tool. These four books, in my opinion, offer all this, as well as being very readable books.

Firstly, Florence Nightingale by Cecil Woodham-Smith, a biography of a woman who became a myth in her lifetime. The myth is carefully unravelled here, not negatively, but in order to present an amazing woman who was so much more than the ‘lady with the lamp’, which became both her title and her image. This woman, who had to struggle for over seventeen years even to step out of her home, made herself an expert not just in nursing care but in hospital administration and organization, in public health and sanitation, in the architecture of hospitals, as well as being a pioneer in collecting and using statistical data. There are also revelations here: the same Florence who was a tireless crusader for a more humane treatment of patients, was also ruthless, using people for her purposes. And how many people know that Florence, in the midst of all her arduous work, wrote a novel Cassandra? There is too her interest in Indian conditions, which began with the British soldier, went on to the ‘native’ soldier and then on to the country itself. The book also yields a fascinating glimpse of the lives of upper class women of the times, imprisoned within their gender roles, and considered so fragile and delicate that they would lie exhausted on the sofa all day, ‘after putting a few flowers in water’, as Florence caustically said of her mother and sister. But Florence too, in spite of all the work she did, regarded herself as suffering poor health and always spoke as if she was close to death. All three women lived up to their eighties and nineties! An interesting read for everyone, especially for doctors who take the infrastructure of today’s hospitals for granted.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey by Thornton Wilder is more than an excellent book; it is a great book. Just 124 pages, it is about the death of five people after the collapse of a bridge in Lima, Peru in 1714, a time of Spanish rule. An earnest priest begins probing into the incident, asking the question—‘Why were these five chosen for death?’—hoping that the answers will reveal some plan in the universe, a pattern in human life. And so we get the life stories of five ordinary humans, who become extraordinary when we see ‘the central passion of their lives’. The stories are astonishingly vivid and moving and seem to say that human destiny works both through chance and our own selves, driving us inexorably to our ends. For doctors, who have often to play God and provide answers, there is a glimpse of an understanding of the why’s of life and death, which come from seemingly simple, almost banal statements like ‘We do what we can, we push on, Esteban, as best as we can. It isn’t for long, you know, Time keeps going by …’, words which, to me, echo the wisdom of the Upanishads.

Cancer Ward by Alexander Solzhenitsyn is a very obviously ‘for doctors’ book. On the other hand, perhaps not. Why should doctors want to go back to the depressing world of their working lives? But this book encompasses much more than the cancer ward of the title. Set in Stalinist times in a hospital in the Asian region of the USSR, it is a mirror of the repressive society of the times: of sudden arrests, of men exiled ‘in perpetuity’, of people living in constant fear. But more than this, the author, speaking through patients and doctors, through suffering, the struggle for survival and the longing for miracles, asks a question which an obstreperous patient puts to his doctor: what is the price of life? How much is too much? A question which is, perhaps, Solzhenitsyn’s own, since he was a cancer patient himself. But this great writer, who belongs in my opinion to the tradition of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, has transcended his own suffering and gives the final word to a postoperative patient who keeps mumbling, ‘Not all of me shall die’—Pushkin’s words. Solzhenitsyn, who defied the Soviet system, was much lionized by the West and got the Nobel Prize as well. Today he seems to be forgotten, his achievements somehow devalued, but these books remain to speak of the greatness of his writing.

Finally Iris: a ‘memoir’ of the novelist Iris Murdoch, a book which was also made into a movie starring Judi Dench. This unique document, written by her husband, John Bayley—also, like her, an academic and a writer—is an unsentimental yet loving record of an Alzheimer patient, of what happens to the patient, as well as to the one who cares for the patient. ‘Inside marriage one ceases to be observant,’ Bayley remarks. This is certainly not true about him, for he has recorded with remarkable clarity the progress of the disease in Iris from the initial loss of words and memory, to the time when this great intellect was content to watch children’s programmes on the TV. ‘Like being chained to a corpse’, a patient’s wife said to Bayley about her own condition. But Bayley angrily rejects this; ‘Iris was Iris,’ he says. Nevertheless, looking at the picture of her brain scan he seems to see, ‘her brain world slowly emptying’; and the words that are often repeated in his account of Iris are ‘vacancy’, ‘empty’, ‘blankness’. He

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found his own methods of coping—from jokes and teasing, to anger and tantrums; but his capacity to accept Iris and all that she said or did as perfectly normal is the most remarkable thing about this story. And often he goes beyond mundane problems to larger questions, like: can there be lucidity without the consciousness that can produce language?—a thought comes to him after one of her rare lucid moments.

Equally problematic is the question this book raised: does such a book not invade the privacy of Iris? Was it right of Bayley to make public the ‘intimate and somewhat demeaning details’ of her illness? The writer P. D. James, who asks this question, says he was wrong, adding, ‘Alzheimer leaves us with no defence, not even against those who love us.’

Nevertheless, since it is impossible for any patient to provide even a glimpse of what the disease does to a person (as Bayley says, Iris was completely unaware of what was happening to her), this is an invaluable document about a terrible illness. Offering a truth, which, cliched though it sounds, is the only comfort of the human race: that to care for another is perhaps the greatest part of the treatment of any disease.