

SUSTAINING PROFESSIONALS

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IN HIS COMMENTARY on the biblical Book of Genesis, physician and humanist Leon Kass, one of my teachers at the University of Chicago, outlines three key components in the mission of founding a nation. The first is discovering a shared story – in the Exodus case, the Hebrew people’s deliverance from slavery and the sense of gratitude and empathy for the oppressed it engenders. Second, the establishment of a covenantal order – an ennobling vision of what is appropriate or inappropriate to do and be. The Ten Commandments are part of this. And third, dedication to a higher purpose – the institution of rituals that provide contact with a higher order and channel human awe and reverence, a function served by the Tabernacle.

If the profession of medicine is to thrive in the future, we need to connect or reconnect with analogous sources of meaning, resilience, and inspiration. A large part of the burnout and demoralization experienced by contemporary physicians can be traced to their absence. For example, what is medicine’s shared story? Too often, our attention is focused on lower things, such as policies and procedures, coding and billing, and revenue and profit, rather than higher things such as our shared calling to care for the distressed, sick, and injured, to prove ourselves worthy to serve the suffering, and to pass on the torch of the healing profession burning more brightly than when it was handed to us.

The same can be said for medicine’s covenantal order. We are bound to our work not by mere contracts governing employment, but by a covenant that asks us to devote ourselves to something beyond money, security, and the conventional trappings of success. A physician

can make a lot of money, rise high up an organizational hierarchy, and achieve acclaim, and all the while stray far from medicine’s covenantal core, which emphasizes not adherence to agreed-upon terms but the aspiration to make a difference in the lives of those we serve, to put the interests of our patients and communities above our own, and to continue to grow and contribute in ways we cannot foresee when we embark on this journey.

We must, as Kass suggests, dedicate ourselves to a higher purpose. What we see and hear, whether through the microscope, in the dissection lab, on images produced by a CT scanner, or in conversation with patients, family members, and colleagues, represents something more than data by which to arrive at a diagnosis or formulate and monitor a treatment plan. As the philosophers might say, we are talking not about a means to an end but an end in itself, something perhaps even sacred – namely, a fellow human being and child of God, as well as an encounter with the divine itself in one of its richest and most revealing forms. In serving our fellow human beings, we enjoy our own best opportunity to become more human ourselves.

Consider perhaps the most revealing portrait of a physician’s betrayal of purpose in English literature, which is found in George Eliot’s (real name: Mary Ann Evans’) great novel, *Middlemarch* (1871). One of the principal characters is Tertius Lydgate, an idealistic and dedicated young physician who hopes both to advance medical knowledge through his research and found a new hospital, and thereby to dramatically improve the lives of the ordinary people in whose community he has decided to set up practice. Like Dorothea Brooke, the other main

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character, he wants to do good in the world, to make the world a better place, and he is so confident of his good intentions that he cannot imagine anything standing in his way.

Lydgate has sought out the very best training, leaving London to train first in Edinburgh and then in Paris, where medical research is progressing at a much faster rate than in his native land. Training complete, he arrives in Middlemarch in the full flush of his humanitarian enthusiasm, naively expecting everyone to embrace his vision, but he is very soon disappointed. For one thing, his plans for reform are regarded with suspicion by many of the locals, especially his fellow physicians. Medicine prides itself on its many breakthroughs and innovations, often preferring to ignore the intense resistance and backlash many pathbreakers faced in their own day. Instead of working with his detractors, he simply withdraws from and demonizes them.

Another problem is his marriage to Rosamond, the mayor's daughter, a beautiful young woman who seems to represent everything anyone could hope for in a wife, but who turns out to be self-centered and to care far more about luxury and status than her husband's professional aspirations. She is not evil, but over time she works on her husband to shift his attention from science and service to the poor to a revenue-producing career that she hopes will support her in the style to which she has become accustomed. Actually, however, Lydgate ends up sinking deeper and deeper into debt, which forces him to think more and more about money. He ends up dying, dejected and prematurely, of one of the infectious diseases he hoped to conquer.

Lydgate is a fundamentally good person. To repeat, he wants to do good in the world and longs for nothing more than the opportunity to exert himself to the

utmost in service to this goal. But he is not indifferent to his own rank in society, and he sees his work and his marriage as means of distinguishing himself from others. His wife seizes on this passion and feeds it, resulting in his eventual abandonment of many of his loftiest motives. Eliot writes,

His troubles will perhaps appear miserably sordid, and beneath the attention of lofty persons who can know nothing of debt except on a magnificent scale. Doubtless they were sordid; and for the majority, who are not lofty, there is no escape from sordidness but by being free from money-craving, with all its base hopes and temptations, its watching for death, its hinted requests, its horsedealer's desire to make bad work pass for good, its seeking for function which ought to be another's, its compulsion often to long for Luck in the shape of a wide calamity.

His very name is revealing. In Latin, *Tertius* means *third*, and Lydgate himself, though he aspires to be a first rate biomedical scientist, physician, and institution builder, turns out rather third rate, in the sense that he loses the thread of his better self and ends up a disappointment to all, and above all himself. Likewise, his surname includes both lid and gate, suggesting the images of entrances and exits that are barred to him by virtue of his isolation and associated inconstancy. He wants to distinguish himself by doing good, but he has no comrades, no teammates, no colleagues with whom to dream and work. Likewise, once he starts pursuing money and status, he finds himself trapped, with no way out.

When Lydgate sets out to serve the people of Middlemarch, and by extension humankind, he has a narrative, a set of principles, and a higher purpose in mind. But these are by and large his alone, and he fails to build

relationships with others with whom he can share, sustain, and succor them. His story is not a shared one. His covenantal order is not shared with professional brethren. He has no shared daily rituals to keep him integrated into a community dedicated to a higher purpose. In short, he stands alone, like a person balancing on one foot, which renders him easily turned and unstable. What he needs is to plant both of his feet firmly in community, hands linked together in a shared purpose.

Herein lie vital lessons for contemporary physicians. Like the trabecula in the vertebra of our spines, so long as we stand erect but unconnected to one another, we are relatively weak, which is a key feature of the pathophysiology of osteoporosis and the compression fractures to which it gives rise. To be strong and resilient, we must be interlinked. It is not just that we are not as strong when disconnected from one another, but also that our connections enable us to learn from one an-

other and to deepen our mutual care and compassion. What we are talking about here is synergy – a kind of working and being together that enables us to become and contribute something far more than the sum of our parts.

To share a story, a covenantal order, and a set of rituals that bind us to a higher purpose is to create and develop trust in one another as fellow pilgrims and laborers on behalf of a good beyond ourselves. To work and live in conditions under which such trust is lacking, no matter how rich, powerful, or famous we might become, is to suffer from profound isolation and loneliness, bereft of one of life's greatest gifts. As Eliot herself asks, "What loneliness is more lonely than distrust?" To avoid this fate, we must render ourselves as trustworthy as we possibly can, a mission that requires us to join together to sustain, if not a nation, then a shared and worthy profession to which we can dedicate ourselves with all our hearts.