

PENSÉES

BY R. R. GRAYSON, M.D.

"The chief malady of man is restless curiosity about things he cannot understand; and it is not so bad for him to be in error as to be curious to no purpose."

—Blaise Pascal. (Pensees) 1623-1662

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Many times we think that all physicians who do not use our own pet therapies must be ignorant and that the poor patient undoubtedly will suffer for it. A legendary admonition from one of the greats of the past is, "There is our opportunity for disinterested clinical research: these cases will serve as our controls."

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As an example, most will agree that the only thing to do with a laceration of the scalp is to bring the patient to the office or to the emergency room and to suture it. On the other hand, the Central African Medical Journal reports the quite successful local custom of closing wounds with the pincer-like jaws of large warrior ants, still alive.

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And well I remember the very successful use in an old lady too cantankerous to leave her home, of simple powdered sulfanilamide crystals on a scalp laceration, thus providing hemostasis, antiseptis, and a perfect therapeutic result.

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I am sorry I quoted H. L. Mencken's epithet, "Civilization is still only

a superficial dermatosis." Quite obviously, he was wrong, as he was in so many things, and one does not like to perpetuate error. What the True Definition is, of course, is "Civilization is only a superficial *neurosis*."

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When we run a battery of laboratory tests on a psychoneurotic patient and then fail to consult a psychiatrist, or at least attempt psychotherapy on our own, we are guilty of, as one doctor has put it, letting a child cry who has had her lollipop taken from her, and then chemically analyzing her tears to make the diagnosis.

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The complexity and the perfection of the chemical machinery that comprise the metabolism of all living things fills me with amazement. Most people confine their awe to the design of man, but actually, other animals usually have the same kinds of hormones, the same muscle metabolism, the same types of DNA and RNA in their cells. A colleague recently said that the more he studies biochemistry, the more he thinks this is the type of life he would like to have designed himself, had he been smart enough. Somehow, even though I am steeped in the lore of evolution, it seems irrational to me to suppose that all of this arose by chance from a mixture of lightning, methane, and primeval sea-soup.

There are no doubt many beautiful chemical remedies awaiting our discovery that are now in use by herb doctors, witch doctors, old grandmothers, and country G. P.'s. If you don't think so, then how do you suppose digitalis, quinine, morphine, cocaine, belladonna, and countless others of our armamentarium were found? As a matter of fact, Reserpine is simply a refinement of a root used in India for countless generations, as you well know. We would be wise to listen to all the tales our patients bring us about old and wierd treatments: we might learn something.

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As a matter of fact, it is beginning to dawn on the brighter physicians that there might be more than one or two things they do not yet know.

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It has been correctly said that you can learn more of the nature of man by observing babies than you can by studying adults because adults are nothing but deteriorated babies.

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A doctor should not think that his knowledge of any given disease, even if he read a book on it yesterday, is the last word on the subject. First of all, the book he allegedly read was 2 years behind times the day it went into print. An example of this type of fossilized thinking is the common attitude of the physicians who deal with kidney stones and who say, "There is no known cause for most of these, so there's no reason to investigate the possible metabolic and

endocrine abnormalities in any given case." Lord, how many years will it be before modern medicine catches up with our patients?

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The chief malady of doctors is conceit. It stems partly from the fact that the good physician has to exude confidence to his patients all day long as part of the art of medicine. Well, you know, nothing succeeds like success, it is said, and so it is only natural for the doctor, who's always successful enough to have cured a few people, to develop the feeling of infallibility, if not that of immortality. Thus arises, also, the dislike that many doctors have for each other: for what do two infallible people have in common who disagree with each other?

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