

NOTES ON POWER AND POWERLESSNESS

An Open Letter to Norton J. Cooksey, M.D.

By Reuven Bar-Levav, M.D.

Rabindranath Tagore, the Santa Claus-looking old Indian poet who was quoted in your article, was very wise indeed when he said, "The love of power is really the love of self." Not only was he a sensitive and a very wise old man, but, being Indian, he was also free of the typical apprehensions and anxieties that burden so many Americans.

History and geography have combined and both have allowed Americans to remain politically naive and often supercilious when it comes to issues involving power. People in this country seek and appreciate power just as avidly as anyone else, since in reality it is an instrument of self assertion. But, they are often ill at ease in doing so, and many find it difficult to openly acknowledge that power is an extension of the self, and that it affords the person freedom to pursue a desirable life style and to make choices. Seeking power requires no apology or explanation, yet both are often gratuitously offered by those who have been raised by means of hidden power manipulations such as the provocation of guilt.

As a result, politicians in this country, the ones who most directly deal with power openly, are generally looked down upon as being suspect. Their corruption is expected as a matter of time. Powerful individuals and groups find it more expedient to hide their power and publicly like to appear as if most of their decisions and actions were dictated by the will of others. Public Relations empires and tremendous amounts of money are expended for the sole purpose of making things appear as they are not in reality. Politicians who are comfortable with the open use of power often become favorite targets of special interest groups and the "Media."

And yet, as both Tagore and Alinsky have observed again, power in itself does not necessarily corrupt. It is incorrect that "The effect of power and publicity on all men is the aggravation of self." Henry Brooks Adams shared with other Americans the commonly held suspicion of power, but it is not necessarily true that *all* men are corruptible by it. I believe it was Rollo May who has recently observed that it is not just power that tends to corrupt, but that powerlessness tends to corrupt even more. Powerlessness invites the misuse and abuse of power by those who have it, for the natural checks and balances are absent. Those with power are best checked by the existence of countervailing power under the control of others.

Any group that organizes for common action must recognize these facts if it wishes to gain any of its goals. The labor union movement in the United States is a prime example of successful pursuit of political and economic power. Other interests such as big business, farmers, various minority groups including women, and recently even consumers, have all found that only in uniting for action can they hope to prevail and achieve their common goals. Basic principles of the democratic form of government are distorted and misunderstood by the puritan ethic when it is assumed that the selfish rights of groups and individuals do not have a legitimate place that one may be justified in guarding jealously without apology.

The medical profession seems to be uniquely naive and at a disadvantage on this score. Physicians have a long tradition of preferring patients' needs over their own comfort. It is but a small step to assume, wrongly, that this means that a physician's only duty is to others. American medicine, moreover, often emphasized that each physician is an independent practitioner, a small interpreneur in the tradition of free enterprise. Even as solo practice is becoming less common, its lore remains central to American medicine. Uniting for action always seemed somewhat difficult for physicians to accept. As a result, political lobbying by the AMA was always less than completely effective, in spite of tremendous potential power, not only because of tax and other considerations but mainly because of discomfort with an open pursuit of the legitimate interests of the profession. Guilt about high earnings was and is an important inhibiting factor. It is successfully being exploited even now by those who wish to "put doctors in their place."

But the real issue is the maintenance of standards of good medicine, not money or power for its own sake. Boycott, strike and refusal to work may not be the best, and surely not the only, means for achieving such goals. The point is that they all are *legitimate* means available to us no less than they are available to other citizens of our society, including coal miners. A special trust is vested in the medical profession that obligates us to use extreme measures only in extreme situations. But we, too, have the right to work or not to work under certain conditions. Legislators in Washington and elsewhere, as well as reformers and activists of all persuasions, will do well to remember this simple truth. Physicians must not forget or ignore this all-important fact, either.

We may not wish to use such measures, and in fact may never have to use them if we and others clearly remember that they are viable options open to us. Doctors, too, are citizens, and have civil liberties protected by the Constitution. Only if we are fragmented and guilty and without strong leadership can outsiders decide under what conditions medicine is to be practiced.

I would like to compliment you, Norton, for your article. It is refreshing to find unequivocal and level-headed understanding of the importance of Physician Power as a legitimate tool of our profession. Unfortunately, it is not very common yet to find such understanding. Before our collective power can be used in our interest and in that of our patients, it will be necessary to clarify these issues to those colleagues who see the social context in which medicine is practiced as it was and as it should be, but not as it is.

The time available to our profession before pressures from the outside limit our freedom to practice good medicine may be shorter than most of us realize. It is by far easier to defend established positions than to have to regain them after they have been lost.

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