



EDITORIAL

A Heartfelt Appeal: We Need Far More Awe and Wonder in Our Teaching!

While deeply involved in preparing the current issue of our journal I went through one of the crowning emotional events of my life. I witnessed the birth of our grandson, Christopher. Because my children and my first grandson were born before there was much openness to having family members present at births, I didn't witness their arrivals. On this past February 19th, however, thanks to welcome changes in attitudes toward the birthing process in this country, and thanks to our son and daughter-in-law's generosity, my wife Jane and I were present throughout the delivery and post-delivery process of Christopher's birth. I must add that during the entire time I remained discretely behind our daughter-in-law's right shoulder.

Decades ago as a medical student and as an intern I had delivered a fair number of babies. But I was too young and too preoccupied with my own performance at those times to sense the enormity or the extraordinariness of those events. Even more important, perhaps, my medical education had done nothing to prepare me for experiencing those births as anything other than technical tasks.

This time, I found the emergence of a fully formed new human being from another human being to be a thrilling, wondrous, and awe-inspiring experience. This incredible event spawned many reflections and feelings, some of which are linked to my daily work and to the current issue of our journal.

A key theme of this issue of our journal (and a core commitment of The Network, this journal's sponsor) is integration with and responsiveness to communities. For me, a commitment to community is—at its essence—a commitment to the real needs of real people. Inescapably, I feel that we need to ask: how well are we preparing future health professionals to respond to the real needs of real people?

Whether we're preparing future health professionals to assist at a birth or teaching them the anatomy of the inner ear, the physiology of respiration, or the consequences to a community of a dangerous, contagious infection, all of our instruction needs to be done with a sense of enthusiasm for our subject, respect for the people involved, and a genuine capacity for wonder and awe at the subject matter we are so privileged to dwell upon. If, as teachers, we've lost the capacity to experience and demonstrate such feelings, perhaps we're overdue for a sabbatical or a different line of work. Any teachers who treat the

elements of health professions education as merely a set of cold facts to be memorized are not just doing less than they could, they're contributing to the diminishment of our professions.

The process of being a health professional involves, more than anything, caring for people, individually and in family and community groups. This process brings many responsibilities at multiple levels. The informational component of our work, while vitally necessary, is the most elementary part. Of course, we should have some concerns for informational learning, but not with our typical approaches or dominating preoccupations. We've known for more than a century that the human mind is not good at retaining or accurately recalling information. We only reliably retain that which we are currently and repetitively using. For everything else we must depend on proxies, such as checklists, books and computers. We must stop deceiving ourselves into thinking that information is actually learned just because it is temporarily available for passing examinations for which we prepared intensely.

During their basic preparation, future health professionals must learn respect for, and the skills of managing information, but we shouldn't be squandering precious time expecting learners to pretend that they are acquiring information years before they will actually use it, if they will ever use it at all. As educators, we have far more important work to do.

More critical than trying to get students to acquire bodies of information is helping them become deeply competent at the process of learning and at the process of humane care giving. With proper preparation, humans can become quite good at responding to other people's complex needs: for being really listened to; for clear, understandable guidance; for gentle, caring concern; for emotional connections; and for authentic, empathic support. As educators we give vanishingly little time to these matters, and our graduates rarely come close to their potential for expertise in these areas. How could they become expert at, or even adequately effective in, these areas if we don't give them proper attention? Our students are unlikely to become passionately committed to learning in general, or to gaining the human skills they need if we, their teachers, are indifferent, insensitive or unaware of all the wondrous, awe-inspiring events that are daily going on all around us. Those events should be the springboards for learning. Students shouldn't need to be arm-twisted into learning. They should be in environments in which they feel thrilled at the opportunity to be learning what our professions offer.

What will it take for our students to be enthusiastic, accomplished learners? ... to have the sense of appreciation, wonder and awe for learning, for the human body, for health, for family and community struggles that they need to be optimally helpful and personally fulfilled as health professionals? Accomplishing these goals will take a few key steps. Producing graduates who are reliably humane in their approach to people and who never stop pursuing learning will take consistent role models who are effective in these areas and proud of being that way. It will take an evaluation system that moves away

from our heritage of glorifying short-term memory and, instead, rewards initiative and effectiveness in learning as well as authentic human sensitivity and a capacity for caring. Having educational programs and graduates who we can feel proud of will take a widespread capacity for being awestruck by, for being utterly delighted by, for being moved to tears by, the birth of a child.

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