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## President's Page

Herbert Ratner

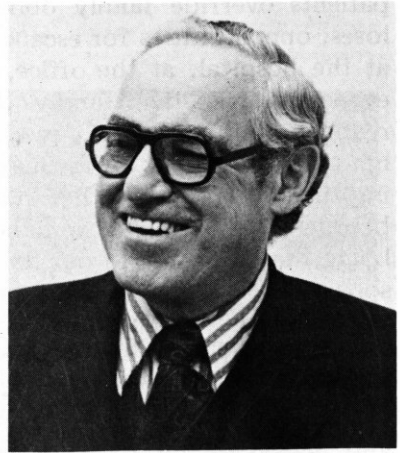
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The medical degree is not a tattoo which for life marks each who receives it as an honored member of the honored profession of medicine. Rather, each day with each patient we doctors have to earn our right anew to the title of physician: one who strives to serve the sick not as technologist, but out of selfless compassion for another human being; and not for the sake of a fee, but out of love for the noble art of medicine of which we are representatives.

Likewise, the marriage ceremony, even when sacramentalized, does not automatically make one a good spouse. Each day becomes a test case as well as an opportunity to walk that extra mile that converts the self-centered into the other-centered, that brings happiness and security to the receiver, and a real and abiding joy to the giver. Similarly, with children, one does not automatically deserve to be called "father" or "mother" by virtue of biologic parenthood. The love of the child is obtained not by mere talk, but by time consuming acts. Love thrives on "presentee-ism" not absenteeism. "Let us love, not in word, nor in tongue, but in deed and in truth." (1 John iii, 18) And, as we persevere in loving ourselves, we must persevere in loving others.

The Hippocratic Oath obligates the taker "to keep pure and holy both his life and his art" and concludes that, "If [he carry] out this oath, and break it not, may [he] gain forever reputation among all men for [his] life and for [his] art." In Law 1, Hippocrates, realist that he was, observes that "[Men not wounded by dishonour] are very like the supernumeraries in tragedies. Just as these have the appearance, dress and mask of an actor without being actors, so too with physicians; many are physicians by repute, very few are such in reality." And so, too, with spouses and parents.

Physicians have the erroneous belief that their priority is their patients, not their families. If this were so, our profession would call for celibacy as does the priesthood. Only occasionally does the priority of

patients override family obligations. Nevertheless, the family often loses; opportunities for escape are legion and seductive. We dally a lot at the hospital, at the office, at meetings and elsewhere. We tend to evade and even fight family. By joining our families, however, we can reap enormous, lifelong rewards, rewards we will not know if we ignore our options: to lovingly imprint ourselves on our children during their early years rather than to be viewed as disinterested, episodic boarders; to joyfully capitalize during their pre-adolescent years on being the only men in our daughters' lives, or the only women in our sons' lives, establishing a parent-filial romance that will not fade away; to become exemplars to our young sons and daughters of what man or woman, what a father or mother should be — by far, the best heritage we can give them.

Perhaps we physicians would be better off if we had our coronary arteries and cancers earlier in life rather than later so that we could begin early to sift out the trivia from the important. Under the shadow of a limited life span, we might temper our ego needs and excessive ambition drives, and our pursuit of material possessions abnormally stimulated by the economic drought associated with a lengthy education and training — material possessions which we bestow on our families in place of ourselves. With rare exception, we physicians will end up with more money than is good for either ourselves or our families, accumulated at the price of an excessive expenditure of time, time better devoted to the family. Despite all of their apparent advantages, doctors' children, by and large, are not superior to others and, too frequently, are inferior in adult attainments; and doctors' spouses, unfortunately, are too frequently widowed before the actual event.

Ultimately, the inescapable fact is that we are mortal; that a terminal illness and the vigil of the deathbed is only tolerable and only capable of conversion into life's last rich experience if we have led worthy lives as physicians, as spouses, and as parents. The solace of dying is in the remembrance of a dedicated professional life and of grateful patients, in the presence of close ones who love us. Everything else withers by comparison.

Whatever the past, it is never too late to take new bearings.

— Herbert Ratner, M.D.