AN EXPLANATION

by

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In an unguarded moment, when I was asked to write an article for the Alumni Bulletin on why I gave up medicine for photography I agreed. Later I realized that the article would necessarily in part be a personal confession, the validity for which would rest on a presumption of its importance to others. Furthermore, it would include a consideration of the life of one who had influenced me profoundly, which might also be regarded as presumptuous. I have tried to avoid this criticism by making the account uncomplicated, yet to include, to make it meaningful, some discussion of the human relationship involved.

Medicine was a science that I came into indirectly from a primary interest in another field. I did not choose to study medicine, as many students did, ~~- but not all -~~ out because of a professed dedication to humanitarian ideals. I took it up

as a logical ~~sequel~~ consequence of ~~to~~ an interest in chemistry, which ~~had its inception in high school under the~~ which was inspiration of a high school teacher who introduced me to Slossen's Creative Chemistry, at a time when the boundaries between the sciences were beginning to be blurred ~~by~~ due to over-lapping areas of activity. The most exciting advances in chemistry during my undergraduate years were, ~~so~~ it seemed, being made, not in pure organic chemistry as suggested by Slossen, but in the chemistry of biological functions. To enter this burgeoning field, a knowledge of biology and physiology was essential, and so I decided that I must go to medical school, not to alleviate human suffering, but ~~the~~ better ~~to~~ in order to pursue truth through science. None the less I was conditioned enough by idealism to be shocked during my first year by some of my classmates' ~~frankly~~ admissions that their reason for choosing medicine was to make money. It was, of course, consistent with the temper of ~~the time~~ of those post-First World War boom days that medical students, along with almost everyone else, should be preoccupied ~~with quick wealth~~. money making.

From as far back as I can remember another influence has paralleled the birth and development of my fascination with science. Having a content of science also, this precedent absorption was, however, heavily weighted on the emotional and artistic side, the latter bearing fruit only years later, whereas the former was manifest early by an attraction to nature. As a child all living things were a source of delight to me, not

expressible or even understood in this term, but were tremendously attractive. I still remember clearly some of the small things - objects of nature - I found out doors. Tiny potato-like tubers that I dug out of the ground in the woods behind the house where I lived, orange and black spiders sitting on silken ladders in their webs, sticky hickory buds in the spring, and yellow filamentous witch hazel flowers blooming improbably in November are a few that I recall. I did not think of them as beautiful, I am sure, or as wondrous phenomena of nature, although this second reaction would come closest to the effect they produced on me. As children do, I took it all for granted, but I believe it is not an exaggeration to say, judging from the feeling of satisfaction they gave me when I rediscovered them each year, that (I loved them.) they were essential to me

About this time I developed a capacity for observation that has lasted all my life: a capacity ~~connected with~~ operative in such as the natural world, but ~~deficient~~ not in other areas, ~~as for example~~ in regard to people and cities or the interiors of houses. Thus my wife could change the decoration in our living room and I might not notice it for weeks. But out-doors I saw a great deal and, without ~~trying~~ effort, became engrossed with nature. Very soon my attention was drawn to birds, a common enough interest, but one in my case ~~in~~ which ~~the focus~~ has been sharpened through the years, ~~to~~ becoming directed away from youthful collecting to ~~learning all about birds~~ knowledge and ~~later to~~ photographing of them. Butterflies more sophisticad

were also a preoccupation, which at first took the form of collecting until it became sublimated and later channeled also to in photography. But I never considered making a career in natural history; these interests remained only a background in my life until years later, when they became the focus of pre-empted my attention.

Entering medical school is an exciting experience. Suddenly you are confronted with an entirely new point of view towards biological phenomena. Biology deals with life and living processes towards which the student is expected to be objective. Thereby he escapes personal involvement, and, in proportion to his avoidance of identification, becomes a reliable observer of his environment. A plant, a protozoan, an insect, an amphibian, and even a mammal is a creature towards which there is little difficulty in assuming a completely detached attitude. But as soon as he begins to study the human body, whether grossly or histologically, he finds himself no longer looking through an opened window onto a newly discovered world outside but, instead, into a mirror where he sees himself. A high degree of objectivity towards oneself is certainly attainable, though on a much different level from that towards the world beyond ourselves. To arrive at The point of self-objectivity requires for most of us - if it is ever possible - life-long effort. The traditionally hard-boiled first-year medical student is only protecting himself with a not-too-impervious shell constructed precisely of his very vulnerability. But not only is he thrown suddenly confronted face to face

with his physical self, he is subjected to a view of all its malfunctions and ~~of~~ to the disease processes which may wholly corrupt it. This can be quite a shock, but is also high adventure, which carries him along like a cresting wave over many submerged reefs of apprehension.

Soon after entering medical school I met Dr. Hans Zinsser, the man whose influence on my life was even more profound than my high school chemistry teacher's, in fact more profound than any one ~~other human being~~ except my father and mother; and it lasted for a decade. ~~He was Dr. Hans Zinsser~~. Everyone of my generation in Harvard Medical School knows who Dr. Zinsser was; knows the significance of his professional life as a bacteriologist, and perhaps as a writer and poet, and has experienced the impact of his brilliant teaching. ~~on second year students~~; but no one knows what he did for me except myself. I was subjected to all the same ~~the other~~ influences he exerted through his dynamic personality on other students, but much more besides. Painful as the process eventually became, Dr. Zinsser brought to focus within my mind ~~a clarification which made possible~~ a self-appraisal that gave me a glimpse of my potentialities and aspirations. This was a by-product of his hope for me, and because it led me in another direction it was difficult for him to accept; but it was a gift for me for which I shall forever be grateful. ~~But~~ I am grateful to him also for the greatly expanded outlook he made possible for me, for the advice which I did not always follow, for his understanding, and for his friendship.

In two years I got to know Dr. Zinsser very well. I was persona grata in his house on Beacon Hill and at his farm in Dover. I was welcome at any time of the day or night as one of his family, and in fact he later told me that he loved me like a son. I could go to him for advice on any problem that beset me - emotional ~~and~~ or intellectual - and he would give me unstintingly of his attention and time. His love I returned with great affection and the greatest admiration, but nevertheless it was a responsibility that weighed heavily on me at times.

In many ways we were alike; he knew it and it was a source of his affection for me. He was a romantic idealist in his personal and professional lives, which I welcomed as a confirmation of my own feelings. The spark of romance that can light human relations at the start has a way of losing its intensity ~~but~~, but if one is lucky, it does not die but warms them by its persistent glow. Dr. Zinsser recognized and accepted the inevitability of this kind of change, but possessing an incorrigible ego, a sublimation of his personal nostalgias into the limitless intellectual romanticizing of science was inevitable and necessary. Our relationship suffered this evolutionary change too, loosing its fire but not ~~the~~ our basic mutual respect.

Moreover, his drive for scientific fulfillment was an obsession manifest in his constant talk about breakthroughs in his research and in that of his associates. Research is motivated commonly either by a desire for detailed information from which

a construct of a situation or phenomenon can be built, or by inspirational insight which initiates experimentation. The two approaches, of course, compliment one another, but Dr. Zinsser, because of his romanticism, attached great value to the latter as inseparable from the creative process by which ~~the~~ great discoveries are made.

Having gone to medical school as a step along a path dedicated to science, it is ~~obvious~~ appropriate that Hans Zinsser's influence should have diverted me from biochemistry to bacteriology. In both sciences chemistry was fundamental and, with developments in immunology, chemistry was assuming ever greater importance ~~to~~ for an understanding of disease and the resistance to disease. There was an atmosphere of imminent discovery during the twenties that, together with the encouragement and inspiration of a man like Zinsser, fostered ~~in his associates~~ a fever of excitement. I was fortunate in being allowed to join the department in a minor capacity in my last year in medical school, and to take up research on bacteriological problems.

I think truthfully I can say that I worked diligently on various projects, none of which ever developed ~~under my efforts~~ how into any promise of significant discovery. Inspirational insight continued to ~~escape~~ elude me, in spite of much encouragement from Dr. Zinsser, and so I plodded along with humdrum manipulations called "experiments" that never seemed to lead anywhere. A facet of Dr. Zinsser's romanticism was a belief that a dedicated

researcher could loose himself in his work to such an extent that he could sooner or later have to be rescued by his colleagues from starvation or nervous collapse. I never attained that state of immersion, for which I felt the guilt that comes from failing to live up to the expectation of another; and although I did often work at night, it was largely because I felt guilty not ~~to.~~ doing so. And when I took long week-ends off, or summer vacations I always sensed his disapproval. But it seemed worse to me to spend long hours and days in a laboratory ~~and~~ getting nowhere. I had started with the conviction, which became a hope, ~~and~~ but finally became a despair that I would make discoveries. I did not clearly understand that research mostly involved a slow painstaking gathering of ~~facts and~~ information and so my unrealistic views on scientific research at last ~~degenerated into~~ resulted in disillusionment ~~so far as~~ about my inherent capacity ~~was concerned.~~ I was unable to starve myself into success or suffer nervous collapse to attain it, but I did discover that perhaps I was not cut out for this kind of a career. And the truth began to dawn on me—that one cannot succeed solely ~~under the~~ because of pressure of ~~the aspirations~~ hopes for you of one you admire.

Probably partly as solace for my failure at research I began, after a lapse of several years, to take photographs and observe nature again; and although in a last ~~flash of effort~~ attempt I transferred to another laboratory, where I worked conscienciously on a biophysical problem under another man, the seeds of my

interest in nature had by now taken root too deeply and were beginning to put forth their own fruit. From time to time during this period I had shown my photographic work to Alfred Steiglitz, who had given me encouragement, but never once had suggested that I contemplate giving up science. Finally, on seeing my most recent photographs in 1938, he offered to exhibit them. His was the most sought after art gallery in New York - indeed in the whole western hemisphere - for he was the first to bring the great modern French painters to this country. To have work exhibited at An American Place was an honor and a distinction that overwhelmed me. Under the stimulous of this recognition I at last realized that I must make the break with science. Dr. Zinsser did not approve; he was convinced that I was wasting my abilities, but it was my life that was at stake and only I could make the ultimate decision about its direction.

I do not want to leave the impression that I regard the years spent in a laboratory as wasted. Without them I might never have discovered my talents in photography and art; and without Zinsser's influence I might well have gone into medical practice, in which I might have prospered well enough. However, I do feel that whatever creative potential I have - though one can never know the end of the untried road - would not have found in medicine the fertile ground it needed. Moreover, who could renounce an association that encouraged self-examination during the impressionable years of youthful enthusiasm and idealism.

Hans Zinsser opened my eyes ~~by~~ through his inspiration, ~~by~~ his expectations of me, and through his personal dedication, ~~and by the~~ honesty and zest ~~of the life he lived~~, for my own inner capabilities.