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# 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 some discussion of the human relationship involved, to make it meaningful.

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 - because of a professed dedication to humanitarian ideals. I took it up as a logical sequel to an interest in chemistry, which had its inception in high school under the inspiration of a teacher who introduced me to Slessen's (sp.) Creative Chemistry, at a time when the boundaries between the sciences were beginning to be blurred by ever-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 pursue truth through science. None the less I was conditioned enough by idealism to be shocked during my first year ~~when~~ by some of my classmates frankly admitting their reasons for choosing medicine were to make money. It was of course consistent with the temper of the time of those post-<sup>First</sup> World War ~~I~~ boom days that medical students, along with almost every one else, should be preoccupied with quick wealth.

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 witchhazel 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.

About this time I developed a capacity for observation that has lasted all my life: a capacity connected with the natural world, but deficient 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 outdoors I saw a great deal and without trying 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 sharpened through the years to become directed away from youthful collecting to learning all about birds and later to photographing them. Butterflies were also a preoccupation which took the form of collecting until it became sublimated also in photography. But I never considered making a career in natural history, these interests being only a background in my life until years later they 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 <sup>life and</sup> living processes towards which the student is <sup>expected</sup> encouraged to <sup>be</sup> adopt an objective attitude. Thereby he escapes personal involvement, and in proportion to his avoiding 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 <sup>no</sup> on longer looking through <sup>an</sup> a ~~newly~~ opened window onto a newly discovered world outside but into a mirror where he sees ~~only~~ himself. A high degree of objectivity towards oneself is certainly ~~possible~~ attainable, though on a much different level from that towards the world beyond ourselves in ~~which we pursue knowledge~~. To ~~attain/certain~~ arrive at that point whence one may claim ~~objective~~ self-objectivity ~~knowledge~~ 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 ~~shell~~ not-too-impervious shell concocted of his very vulnerability. But not only is he thrown suddenly face to face with his physical self, he is subjected to a view of all its mal-functions and of 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 a man whose influence on my life was more profound than my high school chemistry teacher's, more than any other human beings except my father and mother; and it lasted for a decade. He was Dr. Hans Zinsser. Every one 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 subject to all 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 <sup>gave</sup> ~~led~~ me a glimpse ~~to an understanding~~ of my potentialities and aspirations. <sup>because it led me in another direction</sup> This was a by-product of his hope and ~~hence~~ was difficult for him to accept, but was a gift to 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 day or night as one of his family, and in fact he later told me that he loved me like a son. I <sup>could go</sup> ~~went~~ to him for advice on ~~many~~ problems that beset me - emotional and intellectual - and he <sup>would give</sup> ~~gave~~ me unstintingly of his attention and time. His love I returned with ~~affection~~ 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 <sup>can</sup> ~~light~~ human <sup>at the point</sup> relations has a way of losing its ~~overwhelming~~.



intensity and, 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 ~~being~~ possessing ~~of~~ 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, losing its fire but not its basic mutual respect. <sup>It</sup> 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 a 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 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 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



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I did not clearly understand that research mostly involved  
a slow painstaking gathering of facts and information and  
so . . . .



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 into any promise of significant discovery. Inspirational insight continued to escape 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 would loose himself in his work to such an extent<sup>n</sup> that he would 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 <sup>the</sup> ~~an~~ expectation of <sup>Another</sup> ~~you~~, and although I did often work at night it was largely because I felt guilty not to. 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 get nowhere. I had started with ~~with~~ the conviction, which became a hope, and finally despair that ~~somehow~~ <sup>make</sup> I would ~~discover~~ <sup>discover</sup> ~~something.~~ ~~So~~ my unrealistic views on scientific research at ~~I~~ last degenerated into disillusionment so far as my ~~own~~ <sup>inherent</sup> capacity was concerned. I was unable to starve myself into success nor 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 <sup>safely</sup> under the pressure of ~~of~~ the aspirations for you of one you admire.

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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 I transferred to another laboratory where I worked <sup>conscientiously</sup> ~~pedestrianly~~ on a ~~biological~~ 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 1939 he offered to exhibit them. His was the most sought for gallery of art in New York - in the whole western hemisphere - for he was the first to bring the great modern French painters to this country. To have your work exhibited at An American/~~NY~~ Place was an honor and a distinction that overwhelmed me. Under the stimulus of this recognition I at last realized that I must make the break with science. Dr. Zinsser did not ~~a~~ 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 concerning its disposal.

I do not want to leave the impression that I regard the years spent in a laboratory wasted years. Without them I might never have been able to discover my talents in photography and art; and without Zinsser I might well have gone on into medical practice in which I might have prospered well enough. But 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 cast a light on him of self examination in the impressionable years of youthful enthusiasms and idealism. Hans Zinsser opened my eyes<sup>by his inspiration,</sup>, by his expectations of me, by his personal dedication, and by the honesty and zest of the life he lived, to my own inner capabilities.