

A Valedictory address delivered to the graduating class of the Medical Institution of Yale College : January 15, 1852 / by James H. Curry.

Contributors

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London NW1 2BE UK
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Curry (James H.)
A

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

DELIVERED TO THE

Prof.

Graduating Class

OF THE

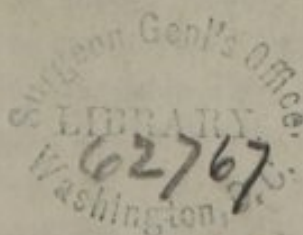
MEDICAL INSTITUTION OF YALE COLLEGE,

JANUARY 15, 1852.

by J. H. Curry

BY JAMES H. CURRY, M.D.

A MEMBER OF THE CLASS.



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A D D R E S S .

FELLOW CLASSMATES,—The end has come. This parting over, and many of us shall meet no more. One more grasp of the hand—one more “*good bye*”—and we shall not hail each other again. We are to-night as those who stand upon the shore of an unknown ocean. The future rolls darkly before us, our vessels are unmoored, and we are to make the dangerous voyage alone. Hitherto we have had good helmsmen; now *we* are to stand at the helm, and direct our *own* course through the war of elements. It is well, then, to look about us, being sure that our chart is right and our needle true—not forgetting that ballast is quite as requisite as *canvass*.

It is usual at such times as this, and it is fitting, to glance both at the retrospect and at the prospect. Still the past *is* past, and whatever of that past has been right or wrong—wise or foolish—improved or mispent—is no more. Our *incipient* stage of study is finished. It may have had pleasures or sorrows—it matters not much—they are gone—and we could not recall them if we would. Our intercourse has been brief, but not too brief to form friendships—pure, deep, fervent—which neither time nor circumstance can destroy; for it is not time, it is not *years* alone which make a friend—no, it is unity of feeling, it is the heart gushing with sympathy for its kindred heart, mingling by intuition with its fellow, and in an instant turning the stranger to friend. By such a sympathy we have been united; and though we may be scattered like forest leaves, the friendship here formed will not be broken. Our spirits will still mingle, and memory will forever shed a holy radiance upon the period which is now closing.

I need not, gentlemen, speak long of the great responsibility you assume in going forth to fulfil the duties of your profession. This will be referred to by one who has felt its weight, and who may well be our teacher. We are unable to appreciate all he will say. Experience alone can tell the whole story. Surely we can see much in the future

to make us tremble, and we may well pause and inquire if we are willing to go farther. The drapery of romance which your imaginations have thrown around the era which is now opening, will soon drop, and you will doubtless find that the practice of medicine is not "all your fancy painted it." Your best efforts will often be misjudged, and your kindest offices returned by maledictions. Henceforth you are to obey the mandates of others; your companion is to be your horse, your home the street, and your food hunger. You are to go forth amid storm and cold—at midnight, when other men sleep or feast—at noon, beneath the burning sunshine—in the saloons of wealth, at the bedside of the fastidious hypochondriac, or amid the squalor and wretchedness of the dens of poverty and infamy—amid the fierce contagion, which like an invisible fiend is sweeping its victims to the tomb—or watching the good man as he offers up his spirit, or restraining the demoniac fury of the madman thirsting for his own blood. Through such scenes are your future lives to lead—and in those scenes you are to be the most prominent actors. And are you still willing to proceed? Then God speed you—and know that, to relieve this picture of darkness, there is another all glowing with beauty.

You are to go forth through a suffering world, scattering joy. At your touch, disease will flee, and the cheek, white with the frosts of death, will resume its glow of health and beauty. You are to wipe away the tears of many a household, and to carry gladness where sorrow has reigned. You are to battle with the destroyer of our race, and you are to overcome him. You are to bid the old man live, and he will live. By your ministrations the young man, weary of the world through suffering, shall revive again, and rejoice in his strength. And from the yawning grave you are to snatch many a tiny but priceless gem, and replace it with all its brilliancy on the bosom where it first nestled, and the blessings of those you have blessed will fall upon you like incense. Truly, if there is joy on earth, this is it. To feel and know that your toil is successful, will give your hearts more gladness than the praises of millions. You are not to deal with the amelioration of the woes of man as an abstract, nor to prate idly on the cold theory of charity unexerted. It is yours henceforth to *act*—to dispense blessings—to *do* good; and though the good you perform may not always be acknowledged, you yourselves will know it, and that knowledge alone will richly compensate you, even though others do not smile.

"One self-approving hour whole years outweighs
Of stupid starers and of loud huzzas."

Yours is not to be that chimerical philanthropy which girts the globe, but leaves the miseries of its inhabitants unalleviated. You are not to stand on the ramparts of State, sounding your own folly. Your arena is the social, the domestic world; your philanthropy is condensed, concentrated, practical and powerful. Your province is to bind up the bleeding hearts of families, to chase away the fears of those who sit under the shadow of death, and to throw the sunlight of health around the hearthstone. You may not share the honors of political preferment, but you will not taste the bitterness of political strife. You are not to harangue the public with your notions of "*higher law*" or "*lower law*"; for in following the duties of your profession, and acting in accordance with its precepts, you yourselves become living solutions of that vexatious problem which has so long baffled the acumen of the profoundest statesmen—showing that *you* at least can defend the Constitution and still act in accordance with that higher law which inculcates love to the whole human race.

Having premised thus much, I now propose to address you briefly on a subject of interest, not to the members of our profession only, but to all: to wit—

ECLECTIC SYSTEM OF MEDICINE VERSUS QUACKERY.

By this let no one understand me that there are two *sciences* of medicine. There is but *one*. But there are *two schools*, the orthodox and the heterodox—or, in common parlance, the school of physicians and the school of quacks. I know that more have been enumerated. I know the world has been as thoroughly scourged by the Protean forms of practice, as Egypt was with frogs. Still they are all resolvable to these two—there can be no medium; he who is not of one, is of the other. For whether practitioners follow one method or another, to the exclusion of all others; whether they style themselves botanists, hydropathists, homœopathists, allopathists, or any other exclusive opathists, they are all alike—*similia similibus*—they are not to be trusted; for selfishness or ignorance has blinded them.

By the agency of such men our science has been immolated for more than two thousand years; and not only the science, for with its smoke has mingled that of a more frightful and unholy holocaust, even the holocaust of a million murdered victims, slain by the very men who from their profession should have been their protectors. So great, in fact, have been the evils produced by untaught and unprincipled men (for they are equally dangerous) that *medical science in toto* has been

decried as a useless thing—and we are pointed to the lower animals as furnishing proof that for their physician nature should only be trusted.

However, this doctrine is fallacious. The practice of medicine, in some form, must exist as long as disease exists. Man's life and health are worth preserving—for he, both as an animal and an intellectual creature, is intrinsically valuable. The lower animals are worthless except in their connection with man. Yet we find them strong and hardy, formed to resist both the extrinsic and intrinsic causes of decay—bearing, without inconvenience, the rigors of circumstance, and dying only because the machinery of life is worn out by its own operation. On the other hand, the human race, whose lives are alone worth preserving, suffer continually from the influences which surround them—at infancy totally incapable of self-protection, in maturer years scarcely less so. The nicely-poised machinery is continually deranged; some one of the thousand strings of this wonderful harp is continually out of tune; disease meets us at every turn, and we are constantly the prey of death. Men instinctively cling to life, and as disease is the cause of death, they seek its removal. This can only be procured by certain means; and these means are found in the *materia medica*. The days of miracles are past: there can be no effect without a cause; disease will not cure itself; a morbid constitution can no more be healed by its own power, than can our common machinery, when out of gear, correct itself. This may sometimes happen, but such occurrences are exceptions to the general rule. I grant that men might, if they would, escape much of the disease which they now suffer—that they might even retain life for a much longer period than they do; for the wheels of life seldom stand still because they are worn out; very few, strictly speaking, die natural deaths; nearly all fall victims to their own or to their ancestors' bad management. But so has it ever been, so will it ever be. Man is not only mortal, but frail; and being aware of this, has in all ages turned to medicine and to medical men for aid.

The origin of our science, then, was philanthropy; the exigencies of the race demanded it. There can be no more useful calling on earth, for by no other are the ills of humanity so signally removed. No wonder that the untutored heathen looked with superstitious awe upon the herb which removed his malady, and placed among the gods the mortal who prescribed it.

If, then, medical science is of such great importance, why has it been called a *fable*? Simply because it has been, through all ages, most grossly debased. There have been a few men, in every period, who have done their duty, who have maintained the right, and who have counted

no sacrifice too great for the advancement of a science whose whole aim is to do good. But others have appeared, and their name is legion, who under the semblance of friendship have treacherously trampled it in the dust and covered it with shame! Love of gain, cupidity, selfishness, have been their ruling passions; and for the gratification of these, they have turned the world into a lazaret-house, and covered the earth with corpses.

To acquire a knowledge of the coarser professions men will labor for years, and study with the greatest perseverance and scrutiny the secrets of the trade. Yet in this one great science, by far the most intricate of all, inasmuch as it involves the great secrets of life, they will leap at once from the most deplorable ignorance, affecting to repair what they know nothing of, and with disgusting effrontery building up a crazy superstructure, which they call a system—having for its foundation, nothing but singular and fortuitous coincidences, a foundation more feeble than the sand on which the foolish man built his house. The laws of cause and effect, without which science cannot exist, are entirely discarded by them; and well they may be, for philosophy is their deadly foe. Such men must be dangerous. He who knows nothing of anatomy, either healthy or morbid—who knows nothing of physiology or pathology, or medicine or indications for its exhibition—he who enters into this profession by any other door than that of intelligent investigation and rational philosophy, is unworthy the name of physician, and should by no means be entrusted with human life and health.

These are the men who have cast obloquy upon medical science, and who by fostering false views and enveloping vulgar minds with their own ignorance, have protracted the reign of superstition from the earliest ages until now.

If we compare the nostrums and nostrum venders of the present day with those of the ancients, we shall find that, ridiculous as the latter may appear, the former are still more so. We may have charity for those who lived in the midst of gross darkness—upon whom not even the morning of science had dawned, for many of them were philanthropists and were seeking diligently some elixir of health, not for their own emolument, but for the weal of the race; whereas those of our own time refuse to be enlightened, wilfully shutting their eyes, rushing madly on in the face of reason, in the face of virtue, in the face of humanity; looking only to their own pecuniary aggrandizement. In this they are not unfrequently successful—for many even in this generation offer themselves up at the shrine of quackery, with as much devotion as the Hindoo prostrates himself before Juggernaut; and those who behold the dreadful

sacrifice, unable to discern between truth and falsehood, raise the cry—*cui bono?* and with indignation denounce the whole practice of medicine.

But it is not nostrums alone against which medical science has to combat. There is another absurdity, more refined and more dangerous. I refer to those new-fangled forms of practice, which are styled, falsely, *new systems*, and for which is claimed the insinuating title of *reform*. The leaders in these schools scorn the name of quackery as an unclean thing. Indeed many of them, the better to dupe the public, affect deep study and make a great show of scientific research, and assuming some high-sounding cognomen, go forth, breathing out threatenings and slaughter to all who oppose them. But unhappily the slaughtered ones are found among their devotees.

And here it may be said that I am opposed to reform; that I am blinded by this very selfishness of which I have spoken; that I am wedded to antiquity, and totally at variance with that spirit of advancement which characterizes the age. If *all* change is *reform*, then I am opposed to reform; if to distort science, if to violate every principle of philosophy, if to sacrifice human health and life to gratify the whims of fanatics, or to fill the coffers of presumptuous ignorance, is reform, then truly I am not a reformer. But, gentlemen, I have not so learned reform. That term, as applied to the irregular practice of medicine, is a falsehood. Reform does not exist in striving to uproot principles eternal as truth itself—nor in ridiculing a theory formed in such principles, and which has been wrought out and beautified by the accumulated wisdom of twenty centuries.

There has been, there can be, but *one true* science of medicine, and that is the system taught in the *eclectic* schools of the day. That system knows no bounds; it is universal, and swallows up every other. We are commanded by our fathers, the exponents of this system, to go out in the world, and to seize and apply, in the name of the universal school of medicine, whatever is good. There is no remedy under the sun, neither will there be discovered any in all future time, but it is ours. Hence if the empiric treats disease successfully, it is not through any worth of the form which he adopts; the cure is effected by our medicine, and according to the principles which the eclectic teachers have discovered and promulgated. But the empiric is not governed by principles; his routine must be followed, and the medicine which by chance he prescribes correctly to-day, will kill to-morrow. His claim to originality is unfounded, he discovers nothing new, he confers no benefit: he merely isolates a few atoms from the great world of medicine, by which very isolation they are shorn of their virtue—the good which they pro-

duced when in their proper places being no longer discernible, for there is a symmetry in medical science, a mutual dependence between all its agencies, which cannot be broken with impunity.

There can no new thing be shown by them. Does a man call himself botanic? His lobelia is taken from our Herbarium. Is another hydropathic? He is drawing water from our cisterns. Has the disciple of Hahnemann a drug whose microscopical atoms make even death turn pale? He abstracted that drug from us, in larger doses it is true, and only has the credit of dividing it. They have nothing but what has been taken from the eclectic school, except their ignorance and presumption. Their system is fragmentary, and too narrow to meet the various forms of disease, and the victims of its powerlessness are no less victims than if destroyed by active means.

Perhaps I have dwelt too long on these irregular forms of medicine. But as henceforth they are to be your greatest annoyance—as they are the enemies of intelligence and of truth—I could not forego this only opportunity which will ever be allowed me in your presence, to raise my voice against their dangerous innovations, and to declare publicly what I conceive to be our mutual opinion of them. I now leave them, with the consoling consciousness that however they may prosper, it is only for a season. Their duration has ever been ephemeral, and must be so. Their existence is a forced one—they have no “*vis vite*.” Once wounded, and there is no recuperative power—death follows as a certain result. Let us, then, “bide our time”—not forgetting, however, that we can do much to hasten the overthrow of empiricism, and that it is our sacred duty to use every effort for the promotion of that end.

Turn we now to our own beloved science—abused, but not crushed—trampled upon, but not destroyed; wounded and bleeding, it still survives, and conscious of its immortality, laughs at the puny efforts of its foe. It has been unfortunate, but so have been its sisters; for advancement in science is not by eagle flights, but by slow and painful gradations. Through all time there has existed a combat between truth and error; concerning all subjects involving intellectual research, the wildest and most contradictory have been advanced and defended. It has thus been with physics, metaphysics and morals; and the systems founded on these have reached their present state of perfection after much building and demolition. Medicine, then, though it has suffered, is not alone; nor is it beyond the truth to state, that from the days of Hippocrates until now, no science has been more continually progressing. There have been many forms of practice founded on false hypothesis, and in due time both hypothesis and practice have been buried

in one grave. Out of their ashes have arisen other forms—sons wiser than their fathers; but still unworthy of long life, they, too, have perished. The “cure-alls” of one generation have been discarded by succeeding ones, and the succeeding ones have in their turn discovered others which we now know are worthless. All this only proves that men in their forthreachings have gathered in gold and dross together; which the ordeal of time and philosophy has separated, the precious having been saved and the vile thrown away; for, as has been said, notwithstanding all the obstacles that medical science has been forced to encounter, it has been continually advancing. Slowly but surely the noble fabric has been lifting its head towards heaven. Clouds and darkness have settled round about it, but the rays of learning and wisdom have pierced the gloom, and in every age and generation new beauty and strength have been added to it. The energies of the noblest minds have been exhausted upon it. Men, of whom the age in which they lived was not worthy, have devoted their lives to its enhancement. The boon for which they sought, they were not permitted to enjoy, but it has fallen on succeeding generations; for though the seed sown by Hippocrates was but as a grain of mustard seed, though it fell upon an ungenerous soil, still it took root; since which, though choked with brambles, it has never ceased pointing upwards. Nurtured by Galen, and the thousands who succeeded him down to the time of Sydenham, and by the successors of that immortal man down to the present, it has become a mighty tree, whose healthful influence is felt throughout the world. And now, protected and pruned by an innumerable host in every land—guarded by such men as these who have been our instructors, and in succeeding years by those upon whom their mantles shall fall, it will not die nor wither. The lightnings may scathe it, and the wild boar may whet his tusk against it; but it will stand, co-existent with time, forever luxuriant, forever beautiful, and its fruit shall be for the healing of the nations! Its roots shall strike deeper, and its branches shall spread wider. Men may combine to destroy—even you, my classmates, who have sworn to defend it, may prove false to your vows and recreant to your first faith; but others will do their duty. The eyes of men are opening. The light of science can no more be darkened—or if so, only to shine with greater radiance. Opposition shall not overwhelm it—its course is onward! onward! its watchword *excelsior*, its final triumph written in the book of omnipotence.

“ Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again;
 The eternal years of God are hers;
 But error, wounded, shrieks with pain,
 And dies among her worshippers.”

Such, gentlemen, is the profession at whose portals you are now lingering. You have been admitted within the vestibule, and have already caught a glimpse of its prospective glories—and though your vision, through inexperience, is yet circumscribed, you all are convinced of its beauty and of its utility, and you are also aware that none but the honest, earnest and persevering friends of truth and science are worthy to approach it. Wherefore, if you are not such—if you have been prompted only by a mercenary spirit to fathom its secrets—if you have measured its worth by the dollars and cents it will bring you, stop where you are: for the sake of honor, for the sake of justice, for the sake of humanity, enter not within its sacred precincts, nor suffer your unholy footsteps to pollute its sanctity.

But I know that such is not the spirit by which you have been governed. I bear witness to the integrity of your purpose, and to the devotion with which you have labored to prepare yourselves for the step which you are now taking. And I know that you will ever strive to honor a profession which in return cannot but honor you. Go forth, then, strong in the determination to act well your parts.

Let us remember that as we have received much from the wise and good who have preceded us, so we are not to live for ourselves alone, but for those who shall succeed us; that we are to aid in fostering and disseminating the principles we have espoused, and thus assist in hastening the undisputed reign of truth.

But I will weary you no longer—the evening wanes, and we must part. We are now to go from these scenes of pleasure, and to begin a new life. Our hearts are beating high with bright anticipations; and in our eagerness to advance, half the pain of separation is forgotten. Yet we cannot but deeply feel, notwithstanding our hopes for the future, that a serious loss is awaiting us; not in our separation alone, but in taking leave of these honored men who have so long been our teachers. This, in all probability, is our last interview with some of them. We cannot meet them all again on earth; for the evening shades are gathering around them—and the taper, though yet burning brightly, is near its socket and ere long will have gone out. But if, happily, this should not be so, henceforth the relation which has existed between us ceases. Their duty is performed; we must bid them farewell, and go on our way alone. But we cannot forget them, nor their admonitions. As we are wandering up and down the world, though unseen, they will accompany us. Long after their tongues are mute in death, their influence will hover around us like ministering spirits, and their silent voices shall fall upon our ears like wandering strains from heaven. Though they may fall, they shall not die; they will ever live in our hearts.

GENTLEMEN OF THE FACULTY, we can bring you no fitting tribute ; but we beg to acknowledge our heartfelt gratitude for your unremitting zeal in our behalf. And as you have honored us by an admission to your noble profession, we promise you that we will not disgrace it, but will strive so to regulate our future lives that you will never blush for the transactions of this day. And now, thanking you for your kindness, honoring you for your wisdom, loving you for your virtues, wishing you length of days and unbroken happiness, we bid you an affectionate FAREWELL.

To you, *beloved classmates*, a multiplication of words at this time would be mockery. There is feeling too deep for utterance, and silence is its natural language. We have met here as brothers ; let us part as such, let us live as such. Allow me to congratulate you on your past success, and to express the earnest wish that your brightest hopes may be realized. But if they should not, give no room to discouragement, remembering that there is a morning sun of joy to every night of sadness, and, more than all, that this fitful life if well spent will end in perpetual day.

And now, as we go hence, let us again mutually pledge to be true to our science, true to ourselves, true to our fellowmen, and true to Him who knoweth all things as they are. FAREWELL.