NMC Essay Club

I Stand With Humility

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In a recent published work in this journal,²⁾ I attempted to initiate a more complete understanding of a certain pathologic entity, the infantile subdural hematoma. While this project may have arisen from immediate concerns, it is important to be aware that the very path to this or any understanding may lead to unsuspected places. One must be prepared to face such unknowns, and therefore at times one should pause and reflect on where one began, where one is, and where one is going. Also, it is helpful to try to relate problems and observations encountered along the way with the experiences of others both within one's immediate sphere of knowledge and also well beyond one's ordinary boundaries. Knowledge is where one finds it, and knowledge may prove illuminating in unsuspected ways.

Neurosurgery is an intellectually provocative discipline in which we as neurosurgeons employ the most technically advanced ideas and procedures in medicine, and yet there is evidence that neurosurgery may actually have been practiced in ancient civilizations. Archaeologists have unearthed an-

cient skulls showing changes associated with having undergone neurosurgical procedures, and of having survived them. Further, millenia old manuscripts such as the Edwin Smith papyrus detail methods for diagnosis and treatment of certain forms of cranial and spinal injuries which are relevant even today. Such work is likely reflected in every culture that maintained written records. Disease processes do not change, although our approach to them and our understanding of them evolve in time. There is both continuity and commonality between our efforts and the efforts of those who came before us. And finally, in our attempts to understand through scientific reasoning and methodology, we find hints of the human condition in many unlikely places. Perhaps this may be seen in the following:

As already mentioned in a previously contributed essay to this journal,¹⁾ a cornerstone of Western religion is the conception of monotheism, or the belief in a single infinite Deity, or God. This is simply and yet eloquently articulated in a single passage from the Old Testament of the Hebrew Bi-

ble, and it is a concept found in three of the five great world religions. In Exodus 3:14 Moses, a central figure in the Old Testament, appears in the presence of the Hebrew God, a nameless entity. Moses asks how he will be able to identify the Deity to the Hebrew people. The response is simple, clear, and direct according to the biblical passage: "I Am That I Am." This response clearly conveys a conceptual understanding of infinity in real world terms comprehensible to finite beings. This simple explanation, received by Moses, frees us from the burden of trying to define something beyond our own limited real world ability to do so. Simply understood, if we believe in infinity, then all that we as finite beings may speak, write, or know is that infinity, of itself, is not an abstract concept, but exists as actual reality. This is a religious statement in its context, yet it may be seen as a transcending individual religious belief, and it addresses both the physical and metaphysical universe. It is this simple phrase that brings the comprehension of an Infinite Being within the grasp of the finite human brain and mind.

Another such statement (there are undoubtedly more) may be found in Genesis 3:16. This passage deals with the expulsion of Eve, the archetypical mother of humankind, from the Garden of Eden for disobeying God by eating fruit from a tree containing knowledge of good and evil. Eve is cursed, and a portion of this curse is very explicit; she will endure pain in the bearing of children. I never could grasp the meaning of this curse, viewing rather a curse as more of the nature of Eve's offspring killing one another, as happened with Cain and Abel, or of her children making war, or laying waste to the land, or leaving her in old age, or something of such sort. And yet, in researching the contrast between human and nonhuman primate birth, I was astounded by the observation that most nonhuman primates do not suffer anything akin to the distress of human labor and

delivery. Moreover, the major factor in the pain in human parturition is the delivery of the fetal human head. And within that head is contained the fetal human brain, which itself contains the neural tissue ultimately necessary for such fine motor movements as plucking forbidden fruit, and the intellect to determine right from wrong. It was at that point I realized that while this, too, may have been meant as a religious and a moral statement, it was also a remarkably scientifically accurate one. The price paid for the birth of a sentient human being, capable of grasping both a physical object and a metaphysical construct, is a painful one.

This comes to us from a span of over five millennia, from a primitive nomadic people deriving existence in an obscure barren Middle Eastern desert, herding livestock. Yet these ancient people clearly

knew and understood these concepts and their significance, and believed them important enough to pass on to us in written form, and today I stand with humility in light of such ancient yet relevant comprehension.

References

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- 2) Uscinski RH, McBride DK: The shaken baby syndrome: an odyssey. II Origins and further hypotheses. *Neurol Med Chir (Tokyo)* 48: 151-156, 2008

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