Ruminations on Ecclesiasticus

KARL RUCH

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I was not raised in the Catholic church, but I have been learning many remarkable and wonderful things from that tradition. The stress of third-year pharmacy school and the pressures of having to answer life’s big questions about the future have been weighing on me heavily, and I have found solace and a means of maintaining perspective in a daily prayer book based on the Rule of St. Benedict. After what I am sure was an abysmal performance on an exhausting examination two days ago, I opened this prayer book on my bus ride home and wearily began to pray the “Midday Office” (as the Benedictine monks call it). Imagine my surprise when my eyes fell upon this text:

Treat the doctor with the honour that is his due, in consideration of his services; for he too has been created by the Lord. Healing itself comes from the Most High, like a gift received from a king. The doctor’s learning keeps his head high, and the great regard him with awe. The Lord has brought forth medicinal herbs from the ground, and no one sensible will despise them . . . . He has also given some people knowledge, so that they may draw credit from his mighty works. He uses these for healing and relieving pain; the druggist makes up a mixture from them. Thus, there is no end to his activities; thanks to him, well-being exists throughout the world . . . . [Let] the doctor take over—the Lord created him too—do not let him leave you for you need him. There are times when good health depends on doctors. For they, in their turn, will pray the Lord to grant them the grace to relieve and to heal, and so prolong your life.

—Ecclesiasticus 38:1–15, New Jerusalem Bible

We all come from different perspectives and traditions, but the decision to become a healer (for I think that the author of the above archaic text would consider today’s pharmacist both doctor and druggist) does not come without asking ourselves questions about calling and faith. What speaks to me most deeply from the ancient words above is the sense of stewardship—that the gifts I have been given are mine to hold for a while, and I have the responsibility of using these gifts to relieve and to heal, and so to prolong life. Frederick Buechner1 once defined vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” So, the fact that I love kinetics, the neurosciences, even the ethics of our profession, and the realization that nurturing those passions (in purity) will in turn meet some need in the world certainly are cause for gladness and, in the context of vocation, a hope for a life well lived. If this is true, then I can wake up in the morning and work as a pharmacist, and this work can become joy—joy that has practical meaning for those who are helpless or sick, and a deep gladness for me.

A grim smile comes over my face when I think of what those druggists and doctors in ancient times may have been giving their patients; they may have caused more harm than good. But what will future generations think of us 2000 years from now? I suspect that we will not be remembered for the physical good (or bad) effects we had on our patients; but, like those ancient healers, we will be remembered instead for our compassion and our passion—for the way that we used the gifts that we were given, in the best way we knew, to bring hope and freedom from fear, and to let well-being exist throughout the world.


KARL RUCH, PHARM.D., is Clinical/Distributive Pharmacist, NICU/Pediatric Service Line, Pharmacy Department, Mission Hospitals, Memorial Campus, 509 Biltmore Avenue, Asheville, NC 28801 (karl@karlruch.com). At the time of this writing, he was a Pharm.D. degree candidate at the School of Pharmacy, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Copyright © 2006, American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, Inc. All rights reserved. 1079-2082/06/1001-1893$06.00. DOI 10.2146/ajhp060215