

## GRATITUDE AS A FRAME OF MIND

Alan Gregg, M.D.

Mrs. Lasker, Ladies and Gentlemen:

More than a little overwhelmed by the kindness of what you have done and again by what some of you have said this evening, I am emboldened to try something I have never done before, namely, to make a general argument in favor of gratitude as a frame of mind. For, if I state it simply and clearly, I am extremely grateful to be given this Lasker Award. Moreover, I am happy to be able to face the future as well as the present, with a thought that this occasion will now give me a chance at any time in the future to repeat these thanks and thus add a flavor of spontaneity and permanence to my present gratefulness.

Let me begin by telling you two or three personal experiences of my last thirty years as a philanthropist.

In 1912 the health conditions of students at the medical school I attended were poor. It was a situation which exposed many of the lectures in hygiene, human physiology and even psychiatry to the suspicion of being offered to us hypercritically, or as good clean fun infused with paradoxes and a spice of sadism, or perhaps as a very practical introduction for us medical students into the probable intensity of our approaching sacrifices of comfort, hygiene and common sense in the practice of medicine. In other words, the conditions of living for most of us students actually left the theories we heard in lectures about sensible nutrition, adequate sleep, reasonable exercise, refreshing contacts with other human beings - any or all of these is a largely theoretical state. The theory and practice of medicine appeared to be two different and antithetical things, with Hygieia and Asclepius two antithetical figure heads. This left us students to conclude that if there

were breakdowns among our numbers - physical or mental - well, after all weren't we students of medicine where those things were commonplace? The theories were clear enough because they were in such sharp contrast to our actual ways of living.

All this appeared to me to be due, not to the happy irresponsibility of youth so much as to the harried tradition of the school authorities and to their tendency to answer the question why such living conditions should be tolerated, by proud recitals of how much worse living conditions had been when they were students. The English language needs a single blasting word for this kind of senile heroics; future generations of students, interns and residents will probably continue to suffer from such arguments.

Well, be that as it may, we students in honest protest, established with funds of the Students' Association a sort of restaurant that served decent, cheap and hot mid-day meals to students and professors. But I remained convinced that what was really needed was a nearby dormitory with a dining room that could supply three good meals a day.

Imagine my delight in 1928, when on a visit to the medical school I saw just such a dormitory in being and in most effective service, just across the street from the school! Quite impetuously I sat down and wrote to the man who had donated the dormitory telling him of my gratitude and of my interest in getting rid of the living conditions medical students of my vintage had been obliged to endure in the study of medicine, and especially of hygiene. He wrote in reply a letter in which there was a sentence that set me back on my heels. It ran in this wise: "I can't refrain from observing that if those who can give a dormitory were occasionally to receive letters like yours, well after the gift has been made it would be a lot more fun to give a dormitory." He was a millionaire. I knew that but that shouldn't excuse him from being thanked. What I gathered from that single sentence was a new

estimate of the appropriateness of expressing gratitude that is both spontaneous and long accumulated.

I could name right now another millionaire who has long been a wise and generous donor to the study and care of one group of afflictions. One day a young Canadian of sense and sensibility who has suffered from one of these afflictions wrote this millionaire a letter of personal gratitude for what he was giving to support the study and control of the disease. That letter, I happen to know has been so long in Mr. X's busy wallet that it is frayed to crumbling pieces. He treasures it so!

One more story and then I'll tell you what I gather from such experiences. I visited, about ten years ago, a small but well planned and solidly built addition to a surgical clinic. It was the recent gift of a lady and I was greatly heartened by the sight of it as a proof, so to speak, that the flag was still there. Or, if you choose, that private generosity was still acting for the same ends that many of the Foundations have in their work. I asked the Surgeon-in-Chief if he would have any objection to my writing her a note to thank her for the considerable encouragement that her gift had given me, casehardened as I might be assumed to have become. There being no objection to my plan, I waited until I had returned to our office in New York where I could use our best notepaper and my choice of a decent pen for a longhand note. I sent it. Five days later her reply came back, so written that it had an unexpected effect. At the bottom of page 1, after thanking me for my note, she started a new sentence which began! "And now Dr. Gregg I have but one request to make," and before I could turn the page I said to myself: "This will be for \$200,000 from the Foundation to build a supplement to her addition. Oh, dear, I had no

business to lead her on." But no! When I finally found the rest of the sentence on another page it was: "And that request is that you will permit me to have your letter framed." How lonely that sounded! How pathetically and unaffectedly lonely! Perhaps excusably so. But so easy to say yes to -- and then to remember.

And now near the end I'll offer you my inferences from these and many other similar experiences. I worry as to how long the extraordinary generosity of the past fifty years in this country can be apparently so casually taken for granted by the recipients. I worry not as a Foundation officer but as a person, because current expressions of gratitude lack both spontaneity and the flavor of long continuing memories. Somehow I find myself feeling a little discomfitted that the exceptional phenomenon of American generosity and public spirit has not been graced by an equal brilliance or skill or growth of gratefulness on the part of the recipients. Our present grace in giving seems to me to be in need of more grace in receiving. It may seem a crass comparison, but giving and taking show something analogous to the balance of trade between export and import in that they must balance each other if they are to endure. And this I would say without reference to good manners or to the cynical definition of gratitude as a lively sense of favors still to come. It is just a fact.

The devil of it is that spontaneity almost by definition cannot be organized, nor can long memories or any one else's initiative be commanded. Thus I am forced to talk in generalities and only after I have ceased being a Foundation officer.

Which brings me to the end of my speech and the beginning of my

continuing gratitude for the Lasker Award. This award has for me the exquisite overtones of being unexpected and unsought for, because to my mind it was unthinkable. And above all I treasure the thought the Award was completely spontaneous. I am deeply grateful now, and from now on.