

The 8th Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration+ Physicians and Human Values

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Standing here before you — the elite of the medical profession of two nations — I experience a nostalgic ache. In the days of long ago when I was young, it was my ambition to be a doctor. I considered then, as I believe now, that the medical profession is the finest expression of commitment to the welfare of fellow human beings.

Despite the alleged pressures of our much maligned parents, it is not lust for gold that motivated the majority of you to choose a medical career, nor lust for power that sustained you through those long arduous years of medical education. Gold dust and medals on your chest are accidental spillovers of professional excellence, and your growing international reputation for excellence is a matter of pride to your fellow citizens. The force that has guided you and leavens your life is, by your very choice of profession, the deep welling surge to serve humanity; even where you are not conscious of it.

I envy you your sense of achievement, the certain knowledge of your constructive contribution to human welfare — both in the field of tempering the trauma of the ills to which human flesh is heir, and in the even wider field of preventive medicine which adds immeasurably to the quality of life.

I would give a great deal to be seated amongst you, instead of standing in front of you.

You can perhaps understand how deeply touched I am to be honoured with the invitation to address this congress, and I am all the more appreciative because this annual oration is named for Gordon **Ransome**.

I knew Gordon over many long years: as my medical adviser, as my expert in murder cases, and as my friend. He was a man of simplicity, modesty, integrity and humanity, totally free of the bigotry of race so rampant in his day, and equally free from the arrogance of status. I am grateful to be associated with this public tribute to a great human being who has helped innumerable people and who has made a valuable contribution to the development of medicine as a public service in both our countries.

When discussing Gordon with the Master, Dr Lawrence Chan, he made a remark which went to the core of what made Gordon a great doctor: “I knew Gordon **Ransome** — he was often so concerned about a patient’s welfare, he forgot himself”. Gordon **Ransome** devoted his whole life, his thoughts, his feelings, to the practice of medicine, to healing and helping with considerable ability and equal zest, all who came to him whether they were VIP’s or trishaw pullers, bankers or bankrupts, white or black or brown or yellow; and without ever a thought of self. His passion for the practice of medicine sprang from his compassion for fellow human beings.

And that brings me to my subject — inspired by the memory of the compassion and humanity of Gordon **Ransome**, I seek to express my anxiety at what I see as a worldwide historic process that is quietly dehumanizing the individual and squeezing compassion out of our blood — in the name of materialist pragmatism.

In the context of your profession, this phenomenon has been commented on by the eminent orthopaedic surgeon Mr V K Pillay, when, in addressing the Singapore Medical Association this year, he uttered a cry of alarm that the medical profession is being referred to as the “Medical Industry”.

The title of this talk and my known legal background may have given some of you the impression that I would be discussing the legal and ethical aspects of the many thorny moral issues you have to face — the right to life in abortion, the right to death in euthanasia, the allocation of scarce life-saving resources, the right to surrogate children, the choice of sex of one’s children. As regards this last issue, I understand that work on the preselection of sex of children is so far advanced that a doctor in Paris has been invited by two governments to apply his method in their countries. He has solved the moral issue by refusing both invitations.

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There is little, if anything, that I can add to the extensive literature on these controversies. When the Academy of Medicine graciously extended to me the invitation over two years to deliver this oration, it occurred to me that your principal interest may be to offer yourselves the spectacle of an extinct volcano. Extinct, I am not; and though the fire in my belly of yester year is but embers now and I am unable to offer you the grandiose eruptions that illuminate the darkness, the cavernous rumbling you now hear seeks to direct your attention to what I believe to be a long term danger that includes and transcends your profession, and affects us all.

The phrase “Human Values” in the title of this talk is used in the sense of Albert Schweitzer’s Credo: “I cannot but have reverence and compassion for all that is called life . . . that is the beginning and foundation of morality”.

For me, this concept of human values **crystallized** into its simplest terms is “**Respect for Fellow Human Beings**”. I believe this elemental respect for fellow human beings is in danger. There is a new god today — the computer; a new religion — materialist pragmatism; and a new priesthood — systems managers. Man is on the way to being treated as an economic chattel — a sheep evaluated for the wool on its hide and the fat on its tail.

Many forms of government have dominated different eras of our **civilization** — government by virtue of superior physical force, government by divine right of birth, government by idealists and government by ideologists. Today, the spectrum of governments throughout the world is more varied than ever; but underlying them all is a powerful common force making for government by Systems Managers — a new breed whose god is the computer, dedicated exclusively to economic efficiency. I see control of governments in all countries inexorably passing from idealists and even ideologists to systems managers.

The modern worldwide demographic explosion and the consequent need for more efficient methods of people control coincide with the dawn of the computer era and the great leap forward in knowledge and power that this wonderful instrument promises. But knowledge and power without wisdom and humanity make for tyranny — and the more efficient the techniques of people control, the more massive the potential tyranny which crushes the human spirit.

I remember, a long time ago, reading an **English** philosopher of the last century — William Morris, I think — who started his first chapter with the statement: “If only men did not have bones, I could invent the perfect gymnastic exercise!”. That is exactly what the systems managers are trying to do — they seek to evolve perfect governments for regimented robots.

We do have bones; we also have blood in our veins. And there is no way to marry human arteries to the wires of a computer. No way to feed into the computer, human longings, human yearning to be the equal to this miracle of life; no way to feed in the soaring dreams, the surging love, and the thrilling joys that make life worth living. The computer god cannot feed on intangibles. His acolytes — the systems managers — conditioned to the gold rush for computer intelligence, are suppressing the intelligence of the heart. They treat intangibles as sentimental hogwash fit for the dustbin of superstition. From North to South, East to West, the computer god has only tangible features.

Karl Marx was the John The Baptist, of the computer era. You may remember that his basic thesis is that the economic system determines the moral consciousness of society, which in effect means that economics is god and systems managers are his prophets. The golden calf is being reinstalled on the altar.

We can see, today, Karl Marx’s philosophy is transforming capitalism’s exploitation of man by man into communism’s repression of man by man — out of the frying pan into the fire; and what a fire! The horrors and tragedies of millions and millions of people who have suffered and suffer today the brutal dictatorship of well-meaning materialists, allegedly for the people’s own good. Let us recognise that the communist elite, like the fascist elite, is totally convinced that its road of state materialist pragmatism is the only road to social discipline and human welfare. In those regimes, man is cribbed, cabined and confined, purportedly for his own good.

Despite the evidence all around us of the horrors of authoritarian regimes, this new religion of materialist pragmatism, whose categoric imperative is economic development, is, by virtue of the growing power of the systems managers, spreading like wild grass and slowly suffocating the human spirit.

The history of every era **emphasizes** man’s limitless lust for power over his fellow man — a lust for power camouflaged as a commitment to the people’s good. And man’s power over his fellow men has seen a quantum leap in our time, thanks to the computer.

The danger of the computer — in itself an admirable tool — is that it is incapable of either wisdom or humanity, and the acolytes it spawns — the systems managers, conditioned by the computer approach of exclusively materialist efficiency, tend to be as soulless as their god.

The Bible tells us that God created man in his own image. The systems managers, with the powers of almost total control of fellow human beings, are naturally seeking to transform unruly, untidy humanity into orderly submissive efficient zombies in the image of their computer god — purportedly for humanity's good.

And what is this good? Economic well-being in the framework of maximum efficiency as **seen** by the computer. Nothing else matters.

And what of human values? What about the integrity of the individual? And the individual's right to develop fully in harmony with his own personality as a human being in the context of the equal right of all others? What of the human spirit that cannot live by bread alone? To the new breed of systems managers, these are old wives' tales told at twilight in a more leisurely, superstitious age. Today, they are occasionally useful as propaganda camouflage to lead the masses by the nose, for their own good.

Where is the human spirit to seek protection from the encroachment of the soulless religion, of materialist pragmatism? Western civilization has seen, for a brief period and in limited areas, the emergence of champions of public truth in public life — the investigative journalists who bare to public view the humbug, hypocrisy, criminality and the honest errors of the governing elite, as in the case of **The Marcos**. It is these journalists who have been the modern champions of human values. That breed of journalist is being quietly and inexorably squeezed out of existence. Journalists, today, more and more recognise they are but the eunuchs of the vested interests they serve. In our time, Goebbels introduced techniques of mass propaganda and the transformation of journalists into propaganda experts. His methods have been refined in communist countries and now form the cancer of civilization, East and West, suffocating the healthy spread of honest information.

It is no use being angry with journalists. When I was a student, I loved history and used to spend Saturday mornings reading biographies and memoirs in Raffles Library. One little jewel stuck in my mind. It seems that when Charles II recovered the throne from Cromwell the Usurper, he discovered that one of his father's close friends and a staunch royalist, his Commissioner of Excise, turned Roundhead after the execution of Charles I and had supported the regicide Cromwell. "Dismiss the traitor!" ordered the king. Back came the pathetic petition: "Sire, I had thirteen good reasons to support Cromwell". "The impudence!" roared the king. "Bring that man here and I will have his head." When the trembling Commissioner of Excise was on his knees before the king, Charles II thundered: "So, you have thirteen good reasons! I don't want thirteen; give me one, just one!". "Sire, all my thirteen good reasons are in one simple sentence — I have a wife and twelve children." When my belly bubbles because of some journalistic dishonesty, I remember the thirteen good reasons. There will always be people who have thirteen good reasons.

As the President is honouring us with his presence, I would add in all sincerity that when some thirty years ago I was politically prominent and being gleefully kicked around every which way by the imperialist journalists who dominated our press, I was deeply grateful for the refreshing honesty and sense of fair play of a journalist called Wee Kim Wee of the Straits Times. And it is a matter of deep satisfaction that in this cynical age, his integrity, his decency, have been recognised and rewarded so well that we have a President in whom all Singaporeans take pride.

Where is humanity to look for defenders of human values in a world where the computer god is spreading his religion of materialism, where his systems managers are devising even more efficient methods of mass control of human beings and mass brainwashing?

This is where you of the medical profession come in. You are closer to your fellow beings than any other group. It is you who see us without the medals on our chest or the diamond necklaces around our throat. It is you, and only you, who know us as we really are — all from the same mould, no matter what our colour, our beliefs, our achievements. It is you who best understand your fellow human beings, it is you who can be, and who must be, the ultimate defenders of the dignity of the individual.

It is you who can educate us in the needs of the aged, the destitute, the helplessly sick, the agony of families of the unemployed. It is you who can help us to understand the meaning of solidarity between fellow human beings. Where there is no social solidarity, there is no society — only a horde of self-seeking savages. I am not my neighbour's keeper, but my neighbour and I must learn to cooperate together for mutual well-being. It is you who can awaken our hearts and our minds to these basic truths.

Is that too great a responsibility! To stand up for human values in a world where the computer is God is risky. At least, the climate in our two countries is receptive. In many other countries, attempts to infuse human values in public life risk martyrdom. **South Africa** and the **Gulag** belong to our time, and yet there are those who risk martyrdom because they know, they feel that human civilization marches on the bones of its martyrs and they have the courage of their respon-

sibilities. The quality of our life today, we owe to those ancestors who had the vision, the will and the courage to sacrifice themselves for the common good. Anonymous martyrs of yesterday struggled and suffered and sometimes died that we might live better. It is the turn of every generation to work for a better world for future generations. When a society ceases to produce martyrs, it slithers through stagnation to death.

What do I hope from you, the physicians? In the field of your professional competence, you may well wish to face squarely the incipient infection of your profession by this new disease of materialist pragmatism — there seemingly exist rapacious practitioners who perform skin transplants from their patients to their own bank accounts. You could intensify your campaign amongst students and practitioners that the medical profession is not a money-making business. It is a public service, even for private practitioners.

You may also care to take a look at two organisations which have recently sprung up in France:

- (A) SOS Medecins: A 24-hour medical service in urgent cases where the usual doctor is unavailable or unwilling to make domiciliary visits.
- (B) Medecins Sans Frontieres: which sends teams of doctors, medical equipment and supplies to devastated areas.

Finally, at the risk of sounding ungracious, I would draw your attention to the phenomenon attendant on specialisation. Specialists working in teams tend to view the patient as the umpteenth body of the day. The patient is not a body — he is a living, feeling, thinking human being. Come down from your stratosphere and communicate with him as a fellow human being, an equal. He needs this.

Beyond the field of your professional activities, I would urge that you bring to your responsibilities as citizens, the same strong commitment, the same courageous activity that you bring to your responsibilities as physicians.

Recognise the reality — because of your understanding and compassion, you are the ultimate repository of human values, the ultimate defenders of the dignity of man. You, of the medical profession, have no axe to grind in public life. You are, by definition, men and women of strength of character, exemplary discipline, outstanding knowledge of the human condition and compassion for human frailty. Your prestige, your experience, could have tremendous impact in sensitizing our people to major social problems. It is in this light that I see you as the repository and torch bearer of human values and the lighthouse of inter-racial harmony.

May I remind you that last year, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to an association of 135,000 physicians from 141 countries. These 135,000 physicians have not achieved peace, but they keep alive human aspirations.

At high noon, it is difficult to believe in the existence of darkness, yet experience teaches us that night will creep in on cat feet. Today, it is difficult for you to believe the scenario I sketch of the progressive dehumanisation of man. All I suggest is that as the years roll by, you take conscious stock of the encroachment of the omniscient materialist elite and recognise the physician's potential to stem the tide.

For me, you are the hope that the human spirit will always be master, not slave, of the computer and that a healthy balance will be achieved between the requirements of the state and the needs of the individual, and that our children's grandchildren will still have names, not numbers.