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A SENSE OF VALUES

It is a pleasant custom in Central Europe to offer to the guests assembled for a banquet a table of hors d'oeuvres. They please the eye and prick the palate. They prepare for the good things to come. Here is a salted herring, here an olive, a fat pink prawn or a sharply acid gherkin. You wander up and down wondering which to choose and usually end by eating far too many although everything is designed to stimulate appetite without cloying it - to give a sense of values for the feast that is to come.

In just such a manner I come before you tonight, balancing my little tray, offering you nothing much by way of sustenance, but hoping that what is said now by way of introduction may play its humble part in sharpening our sense of values. Becuase we are going to need one. Canadian nurses and nursing are not surveyed every day. Dr. Weir is going to give you something to ponder over for the next few months. Something that will require critical study, weighing, measuring, balancing - in a word - a sense of values - and the courage and will to exercise it.

Let me try to illustrate just what I mean. A survey, no matter what its particular technique, does certain things. It attempts to give a true and unprejudiced picture of existing conditions, it explains the underlying causes of these conditions and, by implication at least, suggests a course of action. The greatest compliment then that can be paid to any survey is not to swallow it whole but to study it critically - to analyse, to weigh, to measure it. If we are to take it seriously, and that is how we should take it, we shall need a balance and a measuring rod, a sense of values by which to interpret

its findings before we can safely translate those findings in terms of action.

For no survey is an end in itself. Unless its recommendations are in some measure carried out in practice it cannot be said to have fulfilled its purpose. Any action which may affect not only nurses but the people whom they serve can only safely be undertaken with a clear understanding of the relative values inherent in the situation.

What values? Let us name a few of them. Let us even be bold and begin with economic values. Values in terms of money.

In the past we nurses have been a bit mealy mouthed and snobbish when it came to talking frankly about the financial aspect of nursing. We, like the hospitals, like the doctors, have been unwilling to face the demands of a changing social order which insists, and not against reason, that every public service, whether professional in its character or not, must be based on sound economic principles.

And what are these principles? Briefly these: - for the nurses the right to such working conditions as will ensure steady employment, reasonably good living standards, and suitable provision for sickness and old age. For the public the right to skilled nursing care at a reasonable cost.

We shall do well to listen to what the public has to say about the high cost of sickness. They have reason as the French would say. Read the articles in current magazines written by lay men and lay women. They have a sense of values too. There even seems to be a general impression that we nurses are being weighed in the balance and found wanting.

There are those who will say that the interests of the nurse and of the public are mutually antagonistic. Perhaps they would be less so, if we really faced the economic situation, and admitted to ourselves, and to the public, that the present method of meeting the cost of sickness needs revision and needs it badly. If that revision calls for the abandonment of some of our cherished individualistic notions it does not necessarily follow that our professional standards are threatened. This business of doing a good day's work for a decent wage is like the salted herring on my tray. An honest homely fish and nothing to be ashamed of. I commend him to your favorable notice.

Now let us turn to professional values. I belong to a generation which has striven very hard to attain professional standards in education for nurses. We believed, some of us, that the road to that attainment lay through the universities. In spite of some discouraging experiences, both in this country and in Europe, I still believe it does, though I am not at all sure that we trail blazers were altogether on the right track. However, nursing now has a measure at least, of university recognition, but perhaps our sense of educational values is a little keener than our sense of values in nursing practice.

You know the English nurses are a bit concerned about the Canadians. They say that as a result of certain subtle influences - especially noticeable when the wind blows from south of the 49th. parellel, that Canadian nurses are losing their sense of real values, that we overemphasize certain educational and professional standards and are willing to sacrifice our birthright for a mess of scientific pottage. That is as may be. I hand it to you as the sharply acid little gherkin on my tray. You are not bound to accept it.

If my gherkin tastes a bit sour here is the rosy pink prawn nicely set off by its green lettuce leaf - like a little bouquet - of praise perhaps. Canadian nurses have been much praised. Real praise, not flattery. It used to warm my heart overseas to hear returning European visitors say: "The Canadians are the best of all". American nurses who went to the International at Montreal last year said: "The Canadians are magnificent". And so they are. But wasn't there a King who died of a surfeit of prawns - or perhaps it was lampreys. In any event just to ward off indigestion, we ought to listen to a wise Canadian nurse, Eunice Dyke of Toronto, who said to an admiring foreign visitor: "Perhaps we have been praised more than is good for us".

Let us make one good resolution. Let us give our most careful study to those findings in the survey with which we find ourselves most in disagreement. A very natural reaction to any statement of fact that does not please us is to challenge its accuracy.

The response to the nursing survey now being conducted in the United States illustrates my point. Hospital authorities there say of the report of the Grading Committee: "A very fine report - except of course its findings with respect to over production of nurses by the hospitals and consequent unemployment". "Quite wrong there of course".

Private duty nurses on the other hand say that the part about the sins of the hospitals is splendid but that the section dealing with private duty is not so well done. And so on all down the line.

Slowly, whether we like it or not but very surely, the conviction is being borne in upon nurses in many lands that the professional group in any given country must concern itself more actively than in the past

with regard to the quality of nursing work and practice as distinct from education. Perhaps our sense of values is not quite as sensitive as it should be with respect to the kind of work nurses are doing once they cease being "educated" and begin to practice. Yet, as a profession we must stand or fall according to the sort of work we do and not according to the educational ideals we pursue.

Let us be alert and open minded to what the survey has to say concerning our work and our manners after we escape from the wholesome restraint of the training school. If it appears necessary to devize ways and means of disiplining ourselves in order to check certain abuses which may have crept in - well - courage is a nursing virtue. Discipline is a good word if a hard one. Like the olive on my little tray, it has a clean taste - though perhaps an acquired one.

At the risk of being thought sentimental I should like to refer, in closing, to our need of a sense of human values. Whether the English are right about us or not we, in Canada, cannot ignore human values even if we would. We tend the flame of life at its beginning, in its full blaze, as it wavers, as it dies out forever. It is not a common task that we do and it cannot be measured entirely by inflexible scientific or professional standards. Something more subtle is needed: A Sense of Values.