Where Are We Headed?

by

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“The future of the veterinary profession” is a favorite topic of discussion among veterinarians today. Numerous articles on this subject appear in the professional journals and learned speakers expound upon this theme at meetings, conferences and conventions. It is a timely topic, filled with an equal mixture of unbounded enthusiasm and dejected pessimism. We know that change is taking place and we are certain that the future will bring drastic revisions in the profession’s “way of life”. The fear of the unknown is upon many of us. However, despite some individual exceptions, veterinary medicine is adapting to the times and will continue to provide the professional services required in the areas of public health, animal industry, pet care, research and education. The future of veterinary medicine, in all its history, has never been brighter than it is today!

Instead of discussing our profession as a whole, let us explore our status as individual students. Where are we headed? Every member of the faculty knows that most students have a general idea as to what they hope to accomplish in life. Admissions committee members are aware of the varying degrees of motivation possessed by applicants. Many students have vague doubts about their choice of a profession and, certainly, about their place in the profession. Although less obvious to the individual himself, his doubts are really concerned with his personal development and the refinement of his own character, rather than with his choice of a profession.

Each student should seriously consider his responsibility to his own future and to his fellow man. One simply cannot afford to postpone the decision to do this. The years of formal education are often looked upon as a hiatus during which we are insulated from everything but the need to respond to the demands of professors. The willingness to abdicate the responsibility for one’s direction has been present, to some degree, in all generations of students. Although a student may be irritated by “excessive demands” on the part of his professors or by “rough” examinations, he all too frequently accepts the bounds of the cur-

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riculum and his courses. He assumes that the completion of a prescribed series of courses, and the concurrent burning of midnight oil, will not only result in a degree or two, but will mark him as an educated man.

If education is to find its sense of direction in the kind of civilization we hope to build, we must seek core values that will serve as the touchstone of our behavior. These values need to be defined in clear terms. We must be willing to undertake the difficult task of arriving at an understanding of the conflicting social forces of our day.

The professional student frequently becomes a sort of recluse when he should live a reasonably active social life. Many aspects of that elusive thing called personality can be strengthened by exercise growing out of carrying a wide range of social responsibilities. A conscious effort to become part of the world around us results in “education” rather than “training.” Through this mechanism one learns about his own abilities as a leader and as an intelligent follower. An insight into one’s own talent for living a meaningful life may be gained more readily from contact with large numbers of persons at a university than from the printed page.

How does one receive the highest value from professional education itself? Curricula, courses, and even teachers are nothing more than guideposts. When the student regards learning as a personal matter, he finds himself digging deeply as well as skimming widely. Learning is achieved chiefly by the learner’s struggle, rather than by transmission from the teacher. An opportunity to make one’s own mistakes is considered vital by the good teacher and by the good student.

There is little doubt that most students enter veterinary college highly motivated to become something, and usually to become practitioners. The discouragement and disillusionment that often develop during the first year are indicative of vaguely defined goals. When objectives are too remote the challenge to learn is lessened, reducing the effectiveness of learning. This seems to be particularly true of less mature students. The more mature see in each dissection period in gross anatomy, each exercise in physiological chemistry, each identification of a culture in bacteriology, a smaller goal leading to the ultimate objective. Achievement of these small “steps” on the way to receiving the D.V.M. degree has a secondary effect upon motivation: success has a tendency to raise a student’s degree of motivation and failure to lower it.

The faculty has an obligation to provide the student with opportunity, encouragement, guidance, and little more. The student, himself, must find the satisfaction in learning, which is the mark of the scholar. This satisfaction will help him to be a truly successful student for the rest of his life.

We have a tendency to praise our good teachers and to condemn or merely tolerate our poor and mediocre teachers. Human nature dictates that we be more tolerant of our own shortcomings than those of our teachers. Yes, there have been great teachers in the past, and there are today. These teachers often bring out the best in a student in spite of himself. Some of the most important men in history have been teachers. Many of the biggest advances in civilization have been the work, not of inventors or politicians, not even of artists, but of teachers.

The first professional higher educators in the western world were called “sophists.” They were a group of brilliant orators who appeared in Greece during the fifth century B.C. They said they knew everything and were ready to explain it. Their contemporary, Socrates, said he knew nothing and was trying to find out. He trained people to think.
The most famous teacher of the western world was Jesus of Nazareth. He taught in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. People came to hear him because he spoke like an original thinker and not like the professional scholars.

The best nineteenth century teachers were able to learn many subjects and to relate them to their own lives. The teachers who were most influential usually worked in three or four fields at once and combined their professional duties with a vivid and active private and public life. Osler, the famous physician at Johns Hopkins, was also a bibliophile and a lover of classics. It has been said that the research scholar can feed himself, but the teacher has to nourish many others: so he must draw his vigor from many different sources.

Louis Agassiz came from Switzerland to found the teaching of zoology and geology at Harvard, and then throughout the United States. Agassiz loved people and loved teaching. A scientist, he felt, is primarily a man who sees things which other people miss. His students probably never forgot that the scientist's duty is to observe, thanks to arduously disciplined challenges of difficulty and intensity.

We have all heard the misquoted statement by General Garfield that education was, "Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other". Mark Hopkins was not a backwoods teacher, but Professor of Philosophy and President of Williams College. He understood the worth and significance of personality. "It is far easier," he once said, "to generalize a class and give it a lesson to get by rote and hear it said and let it pass than it is to watch the progress of the individual mind and awaken interest and answer objections and explore tendencies." He did not generalize his classes, his method was Socratic. He taught by interrogation.

These were great teachers, each in his own way. Each expected his students to think for themselves. Personal growth and development, which is education, is a lifelong process. The years of so-called formal education are all too few. Only an introduction to this process can be provided by elementary and high schools. The guardians of Plato's Republic continued their formal education to the age of thirty-five and they were expected to continue their study into later life. This has also been the practice of professional men and scholars in both ancient and modern times.

As students, we are fortunate if we are exposed to a few great or even good teachers. But, the characteristics of good teachers are also characteristics of good pupils. Motivation to seek the unknown, to explore in depth, and to look for broader horizons is present in the good student, the lifelong student, the student who is not crippled by dependency upon curricula, courses, and teachers. Responsibility to one's self-education continues after all degrees are earned. The love of learning must be nurtured now, tomorrow may be too late.

The future of the veterinary profession is linked to our willingness, as individuals, to adapt to new conditions, to welcome new challenges, to accept the responsibility of being self-teachers. The future does not depend upon the expansion of agribusiness, upon the activities of the professional associations, or upon the numerous factors affecting the practice of veterinary medicine, it depends upon you alone. Where are you headed?