What happened to Honor?

By Steven C. Coats

I recently had the privilege of attending the graduation ceremony for the class of 2009 at Jefferson Medical College. About 250 students were awarded diplomas and granted the right to practice medicine. Each of them no doubt felt a great sense of pride and joy (and relief) when they heard the title "Doctor" affixed to their names, as they were called on stage to receive their diplomas and sashes.

I suppose most medical school graduation ceremonies follow a fairly standard format. To my surprise, there was one part of this program which moved me in a most unexpected way. You see, the final assignment these graduates had to complete, before officially becoming doctors, was to publicly recite the Oath of Hippocrates. Led by the calming and mellow voice of one of the faculty, they concluded their vow, and at long last became welcomed members of a wonderful and truly respected profession.

The Hippocratic Oath is often casually summarized as "do no harm" by non-medical types. Yet, nowhere in it do those three words appear. However, there are some remarkable other words that spell out the standards of behavior and personal commitment expected of doctors.

Even though they do not remember all the words, new doctors know the oath exists and what it stands for.

It was the closing line of the oath that grabbed me so much. It read, "These things I do promise upon my honor." What a powerful statement that was for me. It was the notion of honor that was so inspiring. Yet almost immediately after hearing it, I must sadly admit that the first thought which popped into my head was, "what has happened to it."

Current State of Honor

I recently worked with some people from the Army and others from a state law enforcement group. Based on their words and behaviors, it is clear that honor is still of supreme importance in both organizations. But outside of these examples, one could easily make a case that honor has been replaced by greed, self interest or perhaps even the convenience of taking the easy road, especially if the honorable road is too hard. I began to wonder – how much better off might we be if we knew that everyone truly valued honor, and that it would never be compromised.

Shortly thereafter, another thought came to me. Might our current circumstances be different if other professions were bound by an oath of excellence, based on honor? Earlier in the Hippocratic Oath, a doctor solemnly swears that "into whatsoever house I shall enter, it shall be for the good of the sick to the utmost of my power." In the very next statement doctors pledge to keep themselves "from wrong, from corruption, from the tempting of others to vice."

Can this be said of other professions today? Pick any one you like. Is there a perception that big investment bankers, lawyers, politicians or journalists have pledged to keep themselves from the temptations of wrong,

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corruption or vice? It seems to me that the relentless forces of the Dark Side are especially strong these days.

Whom Do We Trust

The cynics will certainly shout out that doctors fall off the wagon as well, and that is true. However, in a number of various survey findings related to trust, doctors as a profession are usually rated toward the top. Business leaders, government, attorneys and media types are usually toward the bottom. There are, of course, many individuals in each of these professions who do value honor and attempt to live by it. But there is certainly a lot of news about those who don't, and examples of the recent havoc they have created.

So what do you think? When you reflect on honor in a profession, where do doctors rank for you? How about when you look beyond medicine. Do you see much evidence that in our current world honor - anywhere – is considered important anymore? How about when you look within yourself. Just how important is it to you? In your work today, is there anything you are willing to promise, upon your honor?

The Impact of an Oath

I have no idea how much, if any, difference the Hippocratic Oath actually makes. My guess is not many graduating medical school students remember more than a handful of the words, let alone could they talk in detail about it. But they do know it is there. They know they have something which defines the ideals and values of their profession. They know that it is not just a collection of words on a plaque, but is in fact a definition of the kind of person they are expected to be in order to be called "Doctor." And they have pledged their commitment to it.

Who knows, maybe if every so often brokers or executives, lobbyists or politicians, or the rest of us for that matter had to publicly promise, upon our honor, that "my work shall be for the good to the utmost of my power," the world might be a less troubled, more trusting place. It certainly would do no harm.

Personally, I hope that honor is not a tired ideal of the past. But even if you are not part of a profession or organization that is guided by a publicly declared promise of honor, you can still choose to live your life by that same noble standard. You can choose to turn away from the seductive temptations of wrong, corruption, and vice, and instead be a role model of acting with honor, in everything you do, on and off the job. That would most assuredly make the world a better place.

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