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D Jeffries and M Winckler

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Dr Bruno Sachs addresses an audience of first year medical students: an extract from the writing of Martin Winckler, French doctor and writer

D Jeffries, M Winckler

One of the authors of this paper (DJ) has been impressed by the work of the second author (MW) for some time. On reading one of his works, Les Trois Médecins, DJ was so struck by a particular passage that he attempted a translation. He received not only permission from Winckler to seek publication but also help with the translation. Along with that translation, which forms the body of this article, the passage has been set in context by MW, who also provides some explanation of it. It is DJ’s hope that the article will prove stimulating in its own right, and also lead some readers at least to seek out more of Winckler’s work.

I first came across the work of Martin Winckler about six years ago, and was intrigued enough by a book review to get hold of a copy of Winckler’s novel, La Maladie de Sachs. The novel proved to be an unexpected bestseller, was chosen by readers for the Prix du Livre Inter, has sold 600,000 copies in France alone, and has been translated into several languages, including English. The English translation, The Case of Dr Sachs, was published in 2000. The novel is recommended reading in many European medical schools and in the American medical community, yet, it has not had the success that it richly deserves in the UK. This is something of a puzzle, as the portrait that it paints of a general practitioner who has become a writer, has been translated, and follows its plot precisely, transposing them to a 1970s French medical school. Readers do not need to be familiar with Dumas’s novel to appreciate Winckler’s, although I imagine that it may add to the entertainment value and excuse some of its more melodramatic moments.

On reading Les Trois Médecins, I was so struck by one passage that I attempted a translation, which I sent to Martin Winckler for his interest, and to see whether he would give me permission to seek its publication. To my delight he was enthusiastic, and helped me with some of the more colloquial phrases. The result is a loose translation that attempts to remain faithful to the spirit of the original, but uses idiomatic English when it seems more natural. Martin has kindly added some explanation of the passage and set it in context. We hope that it will prove stimulating in its own right, and lead some readers at least to seek out more of Winckler’s work.

EXPLANATORY COMMENTS (MW)

This chapter can be found at the end of Les Trois Médecins. Bruno Sachs, a seasoned general practitioner who has become a writer, has been invited by three old friends—now all occupied in medical training in their alma mater—to give a lecture to first year medical students. The topic: “Becoming a doctor”. While Bruno is on his way to the auditorium, his friends meet up and recall the story of how they were trained as care givers. Their recollections—a retelling of Alexandre Dumas’s The Three Musketeers—form the bulk of the book. In this chapter, when Bruno appears, he finds himself facing several hundred students and, as past and present, ideals and reality, clash in his mind, he wonders what he is going to say. What follows is a mixture of both his hesitating thoughts and the words he will finally utter.

THE TRANSLATION

There are six hundred, eight hundred, a thousand of them: it’s incredible for me to be speaking to all these young people, who are like we were thirty years ago. I look at them, and I ask myself how I am going to begin. As they are making such a noise, as they perhaps don’t want to hear me pontificate, I tell myself I’m like them: lectures bore me. How am I going to make them understand that I’m not here to teach them life but perhaps simply to tell them about mine. And then it comes back to me—I raise my arm, I point toward a boy way up over there, I crease up...
with laughter, the lecture theatre murmurs. They must be thinking: He’s crazy, this guy, seeing me laughing like this all on my own, this is a medical lecture theatre here, who is this clown?

“You know why I’m laughing?”

I raise my arm, I point.

“Because twenty five years ago, I was sitting right there. And on the other side, down there (I point to a place further away), there was a girl—I Got You, Babe—who I was dying to sit next to...only there were thirty guys in my way!”

It’s their turn to laugh; they understand me: I may be crazy, but it’s a change from the usual starched profs who come and speak here. I haven’t prepared anything; I’ve been ready for so long. I haven’t come to give them a lecture; I’ve come to tell them what I haven’t been able to say till now. I don’t know quite what’s coming; I only know what I would like to tell them. There’s so much and I can’t say it all. What do my friends expect?

That in two hours I can tell them everything they’re going to spend ten years learning? I can’t do it: I’m not even sure that I can tell them the bare essence, given that I hardly know it, given that I’m only just beginning to see it, now that the words are no longer stuck in my throat, now that I’ve started to write again. I can try to tell them: I know what they keep telling you: “You won’t all be doctors”. I’t

But I don’t give a damn about that; it hardly matters that some of you will be admitted to medical school and others won’t. If you want to care, you will care, as doctor, nurse, physio or whatever. Today, if you’re sitting here it’s because you’re all potential care givers, and that’s why I’m speaking to you, laying out the simple things, the ideas, ultimately, that I’ve embraced since adolescence, the pent up anger that’s begging to be released, all that I’ve suffered, all that they are going to make you suffer: the feudalism of medical education, the archaism of the teaching methods, the criminal hierarchy of the hospital, the inept competition that’s built up between students and continues between care givers, the bloody criminal hierarchy of the hospital, the inept competition that’s built up between students and continues between care givers, the bloody

I’ve learnt to care, however little it may be, to build a few

1 Only a small percentage of students admitted for the first year of studies will be selected for the full course in medicine.

2 “Enseignement magistral” literally, the teaching in an auditorium by a teacher who will not accept any interaction from his students, still common practice in French medical schools.
day if he couldn’t do better—without pretending he’s God Almighty.
Because there’s no such thing.
Because there’s only us in this immense universe, the universe of suffering …

How can I tell them all that without getting lost?

How can I tell them that to care, one can’t learn it with a pen on a page, but with eyes on the lips and fingers on the skin and one’s mouth by the ear and my body on your body …?

How can I tell them that caring is like living, you don’t wait until you’ve learned, you do it right away!

How can I tell them that caring is something you learn from others—all the others: those whom one admires, those whom one detests, those who make us sick and those who attract us, those who frighten us and mistreat us, those who support us and those who are hostile, our friends and our enemies, our brothers and our sisters, those who are sitting here around us and that we don’t know, and who all have something to tell us if only we were willing to lend them an ear, if only we were willing to lend them a hand.

How can I tell them that one learns to care by being oneself because everything is here, in my body made to enjoy and made to suffer, identical to the other’s body, and it’s there alone that we can draw from to understand what the fuck we’re doing here. Because your body, my other half, is always foreign to me even if I lose myself in it, and it’s in my own body—and only in my own—that I feel, that I know if you suffer, if you enjoy, if I care for you or if I torment you!

How can I tell them that caring is like writing: it’s something one does all the time, just by being aware of those around us, thinking every second about the other person and what makes him suffer and what might perhaps make them feel better.

How can I tell them that one cares as one writes: with one’s mouth by the ear and my body on your body …?

Because there’s only us in this immense universe, the universe of suffering.

Because there’s no such thing.

Good morning. My name’s Bruno Sachs and, like all of you here—but for me it’s been for thirty years—I am learning to become someone who cares …'”

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