

Medicine of the Person.

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A Time for Death and A Time for Life.

The team of the Medicine of the Person, by entrusting to me a lecture on time, has spurred me to reflect on my life and, among other things on the rôle of the Medicine of the Person in my life and in that of Geneviève. We have both taken part in this movement, founded by the prophet, Paul Tournier, since 1965. This has been, and remains for us such a very rich experience.

In 1988 at Goslar, the subject was once again “Time”. This was a very successful session to which, for the first time, grandchildren were invited. Children had already been included for several years. A dozen grandchildren were present among us. The list of participants is a striking reminder of the way that time flies, as also of the mystery of every person and of everything that we have received. . The mutual opening continues and it is a joy.

A Time for Death and a Time for Life.

Whenever I have to deal with a subject, my point of departure is to open the dictionary. Words are full of richness and of hidden meaning. They are rooted in history. What is time? Time is the background to many nuances that we are going to evoke. Time is also an appreciation of the atmosphere of a given moment as we take account of its influence on both life and on human activity.

These two meanings are included in the same French word. The case in other languages may be different. English has “time” and “weather”. German has “Zeit” and “Wetter”. As I cannot, unfortunately claim to be “polyglot”, I suppose that other languages have their own characteristics in this domain. The French word “temps” comes from the Latin “tempus” with its many related words. It is the time through which we pass that is the subject of our lecture.

A Time for Doctors and a Time for Patients.

The doctor, by virtue of his profession, is immersed in the life of men, and his daily experience leads to reflection and to take his place in the group in which we belong, that of western medicine.. Our traditional concept sees, in the illness, three elements: a subject, a place and an aggressive agent. But we forget, too often, a fourth dimension, time.

We know that a tree grows according to the law appropriate to it and that recovery from a fracture varies according to the age of the patient and his situation. We observe the sensibility of our patients to the profound rhythms of the universe, more noticeable perhaps in the case of a woman. Every doctor knows that if, often, it is necessary to act rapidly or even in emergency, there are many cases in which one must learn to wait. Maturation is a natural law and we must adapt to the “tempo” of each patient.

An apparently neurotic conflict may resolve itself progressively because the doctor knew when to be quiet or to act at an appropriate time and because the doctor himself, his patient and the people around him have also changed through the passing of time.

The whole art is to facilitate ripening without facilitating corruption.

Conversely, the law of the natural world also involves deterioration and death. On other occasions we can only slow down the decomposition of a frame, set a limit to the crushing of children in a toxic environment, put a break on the progressive decline of bodies and spirits. Time can always hold on to its surprises and every doctor knows that prognosis is a school of humility. There is a scientific time recognized since Einstein as relative, a time that is at the source of sensational progress in medical techniques.

There is a psychological time. The time of childhood is not the same as that of an old person; photographs and mirrors do not allow us to forget this.

There is also a spiritual and psychological time that varies in function from one person to another. We must take account of the evidence: the time of the patient is different from the time of the doctor.

The doctor gives his time with more or less generosity; the patient has to wait, endure, "hold on", and accept what time chooses to bring to him.

In many specialities, one sometimes waits several months for an appointment that is often less thorough when it takes place. A small amount of listening and a physical examination would suffice to gain time by reducing the extensive use of techniques, especially those in the greatest demand.

Many consultants consider that the doctor does not spend sufficient time in listening and speaking. An unwillingness to talk puts the spirit of medicine in great danger.

Time both gives itself and demands its price. It carves and shares itself at the same time. Time means money as the saying goes. It is in good tone, especially when one has money to scorn this saying with its critical effect, only to discover that it holds an incontestable truth. Money enters into time on the triple ground of reality, symbolism and imagination.

The doctor, like the patient, needs money to live and this transitional object called money traverses the time of their relationship. This is true of the doctor whether in private practice, salaried or as an official. Must we regret the necessary concern with money at the same time droppings from the devil and blood of the poor but also a source of life? Social protection systems, beneficial in the West, allow the poor to receive quality care, but with a firm grasp, powerful people often save time and obtain rights of passage thanks to their money. It is tragically true that forlorn people in poor countries have nothing but the time to suffer and to await death.

Time is indeed the time carved out by the clock that imposes its tyrannical law on our civilisation. Physically speaking, modern man is in better health and lives longer than was the case recently. Many illnesses are assuaged by a successful medical science. Is not this longevity paid for by an unreality of life that descends into a partial health infected by renewed anxieties and the fear of potential illnesses? Biology burns its tracks, posing fearful questions. Techniques go out of fashion very quickly. Indeed, one must often act quickly in medicine. It is true that emergency medicine achieves prodigious results. But the flight of enthusiasm brings with it a growing apathy and murderous side effects. The relationship between two people is often short-circuited. The obstruction, moreover of paper work, regulations and the dictatorship of the computer settles nothing.

Medical time says both no and yes. It is necessary to refuse to be devoured by the job, to safeguard time for the family, rest, holidays, meditation and prayer. It is necessary to have time to share. At the end of his life, indeed, the doctor realises that, throughout his long career, he has travelled day by day with death. Paradoxically, it

sometimes requires illness to enable us, the poor rich, to discover time, just as old age imposes on us successive limitations. A look in the mirror is an apprenticeship in our dependence on time.

Being present for dying people is part of the demanding duty of our profession. When, even now, a death occurs at home, the signing of the death certificate was, for, a sacred occasion *and I was doing nothing that could count as payment for my intervention*, reminding me that medicine can provide some time but cannot provide the time, by that I mean immortality. How great a mystery is life. . . . The very person who is leaving us carries away so many memories, everything that we have noticed, heard, guessed, neglected . . .

Time and contemporary man.

The flow of time places contemporary man under pressure. That is to acknowledge that he lives in haste and dressing down, the opposite of total flowering. He is under constraint both from haste and from cutback, the opposite of flowering. This time does not escape furious acceleration. This acceleration strikes our humanity carried in a mad train that leads it at high speed, and without an alarm signal towards a destination unknown. The technical invasion is submerging the planet. We are bombarded by the influx of images and messages that threaten our intimacy. The existence that we lead in a time marked out by clocks is placed in danger by the abstract masters of time. The world of clocks colonises our milieu and becomes more and more formidable. It rules, pilots and causes modern weapons to explode. It does not measure but creates time. Automatic functioning has become a universal power.

Time and Death.

Death is at the heart of time as it is at the heart of life. Every one who is born is condemned to death old enough to die, at one and the same time a prisoner of time and of space. Death is within us destined to gnaw at the screen of flesh that separates us from it. We have to live with death. The length of life makes little difference. A priest friend said to my wife, Geneviève, what the father of St. Teresa of Lisieux said to his daughter in a conversation on this subject: "Take a goblet, I take my tankard. You are thirsty, I am thirsty. Let each fill our container. Drink. Are you still thirsty?" "No." "I also have just drunk I am no longer thirsty any more. You do not need as large a glass as I do."

By contrast, we can shorten life by suicide. One might marvel, in a world as atrocious as ours, that there are so few suicides. We must, on this matter, respect the liberty of human freedom. I think that many people reject suicide because they do not wish to inflict the trauma of death by choice on other people, the horror thereby inflicted. and the guilt carried in wake. Love inspires them.

Euthanasia is another possibility to shorten one's life with the aid of someone else. The necessary legal obstacles are sometimes transgressed. The dead are silent and everything that can be said about death is simply a matter of chatter among people still alive. Death and dead people are, nevertheless, are at the centre of the life of every person. Every dead person to whom we have been close during his, or her, life is alive in us, admittedly in a different, but none the less real manner. The dead come and visit us in our dreams. They enable us to see the depth of our being in all its richness. The unconscious bequeaths its messages to us. We have to decode them. The unconscious never lies. The memories of the dead evolve with time, namely, the

love that they have given to us and the wounds that they have inflicted on us. As age increases, the number of companions who disappear through the exit door becomes ever greater.

I, for my part, tend towards indulgence in the same way for the dead, for the living as also for myself. Men are very worthy of pity and the dead cannot defend themselves. I approach the mystery of each person without becoming involved in the hagiography that flatters through untruth. There is great variety in the relationship of each person with the world of the dead and much leeway is possible. Some people allow the dead to invade the time of the living. After the death of someone held dear, a child, for example, to award pride of place to the deceased implies a destructive attitude towards the living. This is primarily the case with the recent dead!

It is essential that the worlds of the living and the dead stand in harmony in our hearts and play a natural part in our conversation. The people who have left us in love assist us to live each day to the full.

To take on board the past and to speak about it happily is to enrich the present and make it alive as a preparation for the future.

The past is not fossilised energy but rather an inexhaustible resource. "My time", that is today.

Making a bridge between the generations embracing those who have left us is made difficult by the massive changes in our society. Such change is a dynamic necessity, each generation can enrich another. Old age needs youth and similarly childhood in a reciprocal progression.

We say, "I have not time". Time indeed does not belong to us. It is, tragically, irreversible. Time is a rare commodity that flies away like water from a punctured wineskin. Time changes with each moment. It is more or less dense like matter, more or less deep like the sea. We take hold of time, at each moment, like a beggar who receives small change, in drastic poverty. Seconds that take place on the fringe of eternity are worth millions. Something of infinite worth can break through in such an experience. Our daughter, Noelle, wrote in her last message: "Time, Time, passing time. Midnight already, everything is said, nothing is said".

If time exists after death, it is of a different order. Everyone takes a stand according to personal belief. For some people, time beyond death does not exist. Religions do not go without mixing promises of happiness and threats of terror. The right position, it seems to me, is to remain silent and depend entirely on love here and now. I place my personal trust in the mystery of a God of love.

The Future of Time.

As long as he has existed, man has asked himself questions about the time through which he lives. It is also necessary to take into account, in the twenty-first century a climatic sense of time. Disturbing signs for the future of our planet are multiplying. Anxiety raises its head in spite of denials. The end of time is no longer a vague dream but a possibility that is perhaps near. This possibility is entirely the creation of the species that has the pride to call itself "Homo sapiens".

Maybe that after prehistory, man must confront post history, something that stands in contrast to our consumer society. Maybe that the paths that lead through tribulation will help humanity to become more human. The German author, Ernst Jünger said "Where something is indestructible, all destruction is purification".

According to Karlfried von Durkhiem, modern man had three great fears, destruction, absurdity and solitude. The struggle against these fears passes along the

road of personal relationship. Against the fear of destruction stands the all-pervasive present, against absurdity, the mystery of sense, against solitude, love.

It is more than ever essential and urgent, at the beginning of the third millennium, to improve the relationship between people. The entire millennial wisdom says the same thing. "Everything that is not directed by the search for love and truth is time lost".

Behaviour, as witnessed among people, is not encouraging beyond doubt but one must hang on to the sparkle of hope in spite of everything again and again. The future is indeed capable of bringing welcome surprises. The fall of the Berlin wall without a drop of blood was an improbable event that has happened.

We know with Pascal that a drop of water thrown into the ocean causes the level to rise. This drop of water is the drop of love that, at any moment, can change the world.

*Translated by John
Clark*