Body Language

JAMES S. GOODWIN

My mother’s mother was a Cronin, a cousin of A.J. Cronin, the Scotch-Irish novelist best known for his novels *The Citadel* and *The Keys of the Kingdom*, both of which were made into Oscar-nominated films, and for *Adventures of a Black Bag*, which formed the basis of the long-running BBC television and radio series “Dr. Finlay’s Casebook.”

Archibald Joseph Cronin was a practicing physician in London for several years in the 1920s, but he developed a bleeding ulcer. According to my mother, his doctor advised him against continuing to practice medicine. “Listen to your body” he told him. Cronin listened, quit medicine, and had no more ulcer symptoms. The heroes of his novels included idealistic young physicians, and these stories turned thousands of youngsters like me towards medicine.

Listen to your body. That is what his doctor told him. Cronin’s body was telling him that he was not thriving in his current life. He was advised to do something else with his life, something that would make his body happy.

All that happened back before we developed effective therapies for peptic ulcer disease.

Ulcers and gastro-esophageal reflux are now among the most straightforward diseases confronting the physician. Send them for an endoscopy; look for *Helicobacter pylori*; treat them with proton pump inhibitors; and send them back to their lives. (To be honest, I sometimes skip the first two steps).

We may have lost something important with the introduction of wonder drugs to treat ulcers. We have lost the sense that we have to accommodate—to make compromises, to change course—when we come up against a biological limitation. Now we can put our heads down and bull our way through. The stomach complaint used to be seen as the symptom. The cure was to try to alter the situation that caused a churning stomach. Now the entire disease starts and ends with the stomach. Our stomachs may be screaming, “Stop. I can’t take this anymore; what you are doing is not right.” We used to listen. Now we blame the messenger and silence it with pills.

My emphasis on body language could be perceived as blaming the patient. Susan Sontag accused physicians in particular and western culture in general of blaming patients for their diseases. There is validity to her arguments. We physicians are at risk for doing that, particularly with patients who do not get better with our treatments. But suggesting to patients that they listen to their bodies is not blaming the patient. It is introducing another set of treatment options, a set more in control of the patient.

Our culture does not sufficiently value the strategy of retreat. Each of us is constructed and wired differently. One size does not fit all. We each learn what makes sense for our lives by trial and error. One of the major sources of information in that process is our bodies. When we are stressed we tend to feel bad. Maybe we get headaches; maybe stomach problems or tiredness. We physicians now have pills for all of those symptoms. This allows our patients to get on with their lives. Cronin was given another option—that of changing his life.

A.J. Cronin learned body language. Reading the body’s cues is a good skill for physicians. Teaching our patients the language of their bodies may introduce them to an entire lifetime of enriching internal conversations.

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