

**THE HUMAN BEING, NOT THE PATIENT,  
REQUIRES HELP.**

**Georg Groddeck**

When one has reached 60 years of age it is advisable to gather together and communicate what one knows or believes one knows. If one is lucky one finds a suitable form for this: for some this means donning the solemn robe of serious aspiration, others will recite their wisdom with a raised index-finger to emphasize its importance, others again chat and instruct in an entertaining way; I cannot help but talk to myself, this is the way in which I have expressed myself ever since my childhood.

What happens inside me when I am confronted as a doctor by a human being who is a patient? Nothing else than what happens to other doctors: I try to find out what kind of a person is asking me for help. With this I am already deep into examination and treatment, the decisive thing has happened already: for it is decisive that I am dealing with a human being, that this human being is suffering and demands help from me. Whether this person is ill in the accepted medical sense or not has nothing to do with what happens first; it is unimportant whether I, the doctor, consider him ill or not, he does not expect knowledge from me but help. It is not the illness but the human being that needs help. As a doctor I am not concerned with the illness but with the human being.

The idea that the doctor has to make a diagnosis in order to be able to help is still predominant in medical practice, though gradually other approaches are gaining ground. But the general public cannot understand that a doctor could do his work without caring about diagnosis, about categorizing a specific illness; even the amateur doctor, the quack in common usage, reinforces the public's wish to consider illness as something of importance. It will be decades before the diagnosis of the human being will be a general custom. The mistakes of the expert — and our kind of diagnosing constitutes an expert's mistake — continue long after they have been recognized as such by experts; they are tough, inert masses and difficult to get rid off. This is why the doctor who takes his profession seriously and enjoys it will have to repeat to himself again and again: to diagnose an illness is of little use, can often be dispensed with and is often very, very damaging. To recognize the human being or rather to make guesses about him — since recognition is hardly ever possible — is what is needed. The doctor has nothing to do with illness, this is the pathologist's affair, the doctor as doctor has to deal with a specific individual that has come to him for help, everything else is of interest to him only insofar as it can be used by him for treatment. There are three things only which have to be observed on starting treatment: the human being who is to be treated, his request for help, and his relationship to the person from whom he asks help. These are the materials of diagnostics, everything else is of secondary interest in comparison.

One would think it is easy to follow this instruction; but it is not. On the contrary, one could say that this kind of diagnosis is the doctor's most difficult task and that this task cannot possibly be solved completely. That it is so difficult is explained by the fact that these areas of diagnostics are usually neglected. Almost always the doctor's attention is first focused on establishing the nature of the illness — he examines and decides what measures to take, how to fight it. The fact that the individual human being is to be discovered by all available means, with every effort, if possible in all his vital concerns, that the doctor is not dealing with illness, not even with ill or suffering people but rather with people in need of help who are often, mostly, not ill or whose illness is of secondary importance, that at the moment when the person who is seeking help encounters the helper something totally new happens, namely the most important aspect of diagnosis and treatment, a relationship is established between the person seeking help and his helper and

vice versa, this is known only to a few and those who know are rarely able to use their knowledge for they are not gods, they harbor the enemy of all doctorhood and godhead, vanity.

I hope it is understood that I was talking of myself, when I was being so critical. Who else would I be talking of since I know so little, in fact nothing, about others? I am old enough - I said it before in order to be allowed to talk about myself, exclusively about myself; I beg you not to forget what I am writing here is a soliloquy. Do not forget that this is a human being who comes to you here. Remember what you know of human beings, and the first virtue of doctors, humility, will be yours automatically; for you know how little you know. Of course, you might say here is somebody who is neither chair nor carpet, neither animal nor flower, neither stone nor wood.

Yet is what you are saying true? No. This person is in reality animal and flower, stone, wood, carpet, and chair, too.

Beware, if you attempt to pry him away now from his connection with the universe, do not forget how many mistakes this attempt at isolation brings about and must bring about, mistakes which, perpetrated thousands of times, have heaped up so much debris around you that it requires all your strength and all your greatness to lift up your eyes over the pile. If you isolate man and deny that he is animal and flower, stone, and wood, then you are like a person who does nothing else during his whole life but look through a microscope: he is in danger of denying heaven, earth, the stars, since he cannot look at them through a microscope. Remember that the human being in front of you is an arbitrary figment of your lack of imagination, that he certainly is not what you believe you can see in him, that you give expression to a miserable probability when you state: this human being is like this or like that.

Of course, you cannot help making this inevitable mistake when you want to treat somebody, but you should be aware that it is a mistake otherwise you will have less understanding than the simplest Indian. You should, moreover, accept scientific errors; life is strong and will not let you founder because of your ignorance. Yet you have to be even more honest and admit to yourself that you are violating this isolated piece of world if you regard it as an entity by itself. This is not true. You know that this entity set up by you artificially is a thousand million-fold multiplicity, is a conglomerate of innumerable and immeasurable multiplicities which are independent and yet conditioned by the whole of man. Every cell, every cell nucleus, every tiny particle lives its own life. Are you so foolish that you want to know what cannot be known?

Yes, I am bold enough to know, in spite of this, like everybody else, bold enough to err, yet I err knowingly, I remember sometimes that I err. And this remembering is important. Man's danger is his vanity, it is his danger and his greatest strength. It is difficult to help those who cannot understand this.

The human being should be diagnosed in as many of the breadths, depths, flat and narrow bits of his nature as possible, in all the elements which all human beings share and those which seem peculiar to individuals alone, but which to the gaze of the old keep shrinking: his shape and the shape of his limbs, his external and internal parts, and all his functions from breathing, sleeping, moving, digesting, heart beat to speaking, thinking, feeling. The It talks to us in a thousand languages, loudly and mutely, hesitatingly and cheekily, in well-composed, easily understood paragraphs and in quick interjections, and occasionally in a kind of gibberish which sounds childish or even mad and yet makes sense if patiently listened to. Occasionally we need some physical or chemical test, an X-ray, a checkup of the heart, an examination of the chest, a screening of the hidden cavities, and whatever else there may be in the way of possible medical investigations. Yet all these things which seem to make up the doctor's work are only occasional necessities, they do not mean very much in terms of the whole of medical business, they can mostly be dispensed with and should never be uppermost in medical practice, let alone be its whole content. Not everybody who goes to a doctor demands help against his illness, most people are simply seeking help of any kind, and most of them are not helped much when they recover from their illness.

The human being, not the patient, goes to the doctor, the human being not the patient asks for help. Certainly the shortest and easiest way to help is often to tackle his illness, yet not necessarily, for illness is merely a form of expression used by the suffering It which vociferously emphasizes its illness in order to be able to hide its deepest secret the better.

To study man is ultimately the most important duty of the doctor, and our researches of the past century have been very little concerned with that. One can even say without qualification that we have forgotten a lot of what our ancestors knew and what is of urgent importance to the doctor, and also to the scholar — though I would not be so bold as to pass judgment on that strange human species.

Man is not always the same, everybody knows that; he changes constantly, yet who remembers that he changes constantly? Who would therefore shy away from making a diagnosis and yet we all know of this uninterrupted change in man's nature? — Of course, we follow the course of the illness and change our diagnosis when the doctor's function consists in discovering not the illness but the person who is seeking help, and we do not follow his changes or not enough. Thus inevitably all the essential things about the people who come to us remain hidden from us; they are patients, ill people not human beings; to be ill to us is still something essentially different from being well, we still do not acknowledge life's ambivalence, we still pretend that illness is an evil, as if it weren't as sublime in the language of illness as it is in the language of painting or writing poetry or researching. We still do not understand that in the illness the It expresses thoughts as deep as in the gospels and that it announces in both forms the very same thing: Behold the greatness of God and the miracle of man!

Man changes; there is no doubt; and yet he always stays the same; that, too, everybody knows. Nobody will mistake a human being for a dog or a gnat. Yet we forget this, too, when we come to diagnosis. Otherwise it would not be possible that two fundamental facts which are a part of every honest diagnosis are rarely ever mentioned in medical literature, firstly, that man's It is bisexual, that every human being is a hermaphrodite, that never has there been a creature that is only man or only woman; secondly, that man's It is timeless, that it is never child, or adult, or old man but always all three simultaneously, and that adulthood and old age are as nothing compared with being a child if one weighs the three evolutionary stages according to their importance for the individual. The sentence: If you do not become like children you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven, can safely be changed to: since you are all children you are all in heaven. Unfortunately nobody takes easily to the fact that he is a child; the twenty-year old and the sixty-year old is as obsessed as the six-year old by the wish to be a grown-up, and as this seldom comes about, at least act as if he were; which is ridiculous, of course.

Since it is my intention to flavor these soliloquies with occasional examples, I shall tell a story here. It is about a maid servant, she complained of violent pain in the area of the heart, she was examined, found to have a defective cardiac valve, shown the cardiac enlargement on her X-ray, discovered to have severe pain in the seventh inter-costal nerve; swelling from the feet up to the calves was observed and used to make the diagnosis: mitral insufficiency — a closure defect of the valve. Rest, careful nursing, digitalis taken internally. There is nothing to object to either in the name of the illness or in the treatment. Only the treatment doesn't work and the diagnosis, the name of the illness, is wrong. At least this is the conclusion I draw from the further course of the illness.

The girl had a faint black fluff on her upper lip, something that is quite common and seems to be particularly attractive to certain men, I am told by those who know. After a while, when she had become more trusting, she told me that the moustache had to be shaved from time to time otherwise her mouth looked too ugly. Wouldn't it have been advisable if the doctor had taken account of this obvious sign of the girl's masculinity before he decided on the name of the illness and digitalis treatment? He might then perhaps have noticed that the right index finger was stiff as the result of an ulcer. Moreover, if he had noticed that this decidedly shy girl had a page-boy haircut, that her hair was parted like a boy's, that her first name was Friederike, he might have decided to learn a little more about the masculine aspects of this woman's personality. Soon guided by the girl's evidence and behavior - he would probably have begun to doubt whether the absence of the menstrual period for over a year was really due to the assumed heart disease or whether it might not be seen as an expression of masculine wishes. Perhaps he would have been heretical enough, against all the rules of medical science, to take the swelling of the feet and the stiffness of the finger as an erection symbol and not as a consequence of defective cardiac activity. In short, he would have felt bound to explore the human being and, since this is a true story, he would soon have found out that this girl was in the grip of

a hopeless homosexual love that tortured her heart and conscience. She would have told him gradually as she told me; if only he had remembered that one of the fundamental principles of diagnosis is to establish how much masculinity there is in female patients and how much femininity in male patients. Finally, a new X-ray, the disappearance of water from the feet, the sounds of the heart, the recurrence of menstruation and the cessation of pain would have taught him that there was no question of a defective cardiac valve. In particular - and this is why I mention this case - he would have learnt that this girl had chosen her illness because illness and even death would have been easier to bear for her erring and badly informed than the unfulfilled longing for women which seemed unnatural to her mind.

This may be sufficient for today.

First published in Die Arche, III, 2 (26.4.1927). Reprinted in Georg Groddeck, Der Mensch und sein Es, Wiesbaden, 1970.

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*Volver a Newsletter-13-ALSF*