

# Osler and the Art of Procrastination

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**Hasty, precipitous judgment was once the symbol of flightiness,** pubescent exuberance or intemperate actions. Haste in every business, said Herodotus [c. 485 – 425 BCE], only brings failures. Haste, then, was deplored except in those rare instances of human passion as when the Scriptural Song of Solomon declared: “Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices.”

But somewhere along the line, a lack of haste underwent a tidal transformation and was labeled as procrastination, perhaps at the same time as the invention of such societal contrivances as deadlines, progress reports and production quotas. In a 1749 letter to an acquaintance, Lord Chesterfield [1694 – 1773] wrote the following oft-quoted manifesto: “No idleness, no laziness, no procrastination: never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.” The emerging Industrial Revolution in England had its battle anthem.

Slowly, ever so slowly, reflective judgment, once a hallmark of maturity and Socratic wisdom, was tainted as the outer face of lazy indecision and was further stigmatized as the thief of time. The waking moments of each day were now zealously counted and each minute was to be shielded against wanton wastage. Thomas de Quincey [1785 – 1859] wrote: “If once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he comes next to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination.” Admittedly, de Quincey was exhibiting his customary perverse humor and hyperbole, but still he managed to equate procrastination with society’s most egregious crimes.

The word, procrastination, carries the unpleasant aroma of laziness, wasteful dawdling, indolence and dilatory dithering while the world impatiently yearns for forthright, assertive decision-making. Procrastination bespeaks of deliberate misuse of that precious gift called time. And thus, inevitably, procrastination has become the unyielding enemy of human progress. The humble Latin origins of the word, however, tell us that its original meaning and intent was less declaratory: the word was based upon the Latin, *crastinus*, meaning ‘of tomorrow’; and with the prefix, *pro-*, it was meant to yield a word meaning ‘to give unto tomorrow.’ [Procrastination should not be confused with the word, procrastination which means a breathless desire to visit a city south of Providence.]

Well, if procrastination is not naked laziness then surely it bespeaks of rank indecision. Indecision is one of those words that can signify something pejorative; or, on the other hand, can be the sign of patient wisdom. Time usually decides whether a person’s stance had been pathologically hesitant, vacillating and irresolute or, on the other hand, appropriately and wisely hesitant until further information had been gathered. The equation between resolution and irresolution is frequently the historic report-card on whether one is a Neville Chamberlain or a Winston Churchill.

And where, in the evolution of the practice of medicine, does decision and indecision play any role? Certainly in the maturation of the profession, from its activity, millennia ago, as

a subset of magic, through its struggle over the centuries to become, ultimately, a helpful calling. There had been nodal points in this plodding evolution when the profession had overreached itself – and thus did more harm than good in exploiting its meager and dubious armamentarium of interventions: blood-letting and agents fostering emesis and purging. After all, if one’s sole tool is a hammer, nails inevitably will look attractive.

The 18<sup>th</sup> Century physician was taught to intervene according to the precepts of Galen, who had lived 17 centuries before. Galenic medicine had supplanted an older paradigm which declared: Observe, use few medicines and encourage Nature in its healing paths.

A Canadian physician, William Osler [1849 – 1919], did much to bring merit and purpose to the act of indecision. Osler’s career in Canada, then the United States and finally as the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University brought him to be the most revered and honored physician in the Western World. Much of his teaching, however, sounded regressive. For example, he deplored the fact that the desire to take medicine was the most outstanding feature that distinguished humans from animals. And since he had little faith in the great majority of medications available at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he urged that they all be dumped into the Atlantic Ocean, noting in passing that the only harm would be to the fishes.

His advice to younger physicians, beyond his belief in pharmacologic nihilism, was to observe before you intervene. Certainly Osler recognized the existence of surgical emergencies, but the overwhelming causes for humans seeking medical aid, he believed, did not require precipitous action. It was Osler’s practice to stare at the patient at great length while listening carefully to his concerns, complaints and anxieties. It was not out of reticence that Osler was reluctant to employ one drug or another. Rather, he believed that they were essentially worthless if not actually harmful. And so Oslerian medicine was constructed, first, on the art of assertive bedside indecisiveness furthered by the belief that only rational research, not charisma, will eventually yield medications with proven merit. Osler died in 1919. In the three decades following his death, medicine added such proven medicines as insulin, antibiotics such as penicillin, a variety of therapeutic hormones such as ACTH, and a spectrum of objective biochemical and radiological diagnostic procedures to convert a noble profession into a scientific and competent enterprise.

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## Disclosure of Financial Interests

Stanley M. Aronson, MD, has no financial interests to disclose.

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