Henry Marsh in His World

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English neurosurgeon Henry Marsh has written a memoir *Do No Harm Stories of Life, Death, and Brain Surgery* (St. Martin's. New York, 2015) deserving of attention from a broad range of readers: clinicians, administrators, a general public interested in what the practice of medicine and surgery is really like, and those who seek to write honestly about the course of their lives and careers. In a recent issue of this *Journal* (53[6], pp. 1923–1929) I wrote an essay entitled *Harvey Cushing, M.D., in his World* based on the life and historical context of one of the great pioneers in the field of neurosurgery Harvey Cushing (1869–1939). It was first given as a Grand Rounds presentation made to the Department of Neurosurgery at the New York Presbyterian Hospital Weill Cornell Center in New York in 2006. Before and since that occasion I have spent a good deal of time and effort thinking and talking about writing with friends, colleagues, and contributors to the *Journal*. From that perspective I have come to believe how necessary it is for those who write to keep in mind the words of Ernest Hemingway, “All you have to do is to write one true sentence.” Reading Henry Marsh’s *Do No Harm* only confirms for me Hemingway’s admonition.

Henry Marsh did not come to his vocation as a neurosurgeon easily or quickly. He was schooled in a very traditional British way in a public (for them private) school and then Oxford where he did not study the sciences but instead pursued a degree in Politics, Philosophy, and Economics. It was only after an extended period of searching that he engaged in course work that would make it possible for him to attend medical school. In the USA this is popularly known as a “post baccalaureate” course of study where those who previously have shown no interest in attending medical school pursue a program that will allow them, like Henry Marsh, to go forward and apply to medical school after all. He then would undergo the rigors of what we know here in the USA as residency training. Even then the path toward satisfaction was not altogether clear. Perhaps surgery would be

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the way to go but maybe not. In one of the most striking passages in the book Marsh records how he observes a neurosurgical procedure through the window of an operating room and is mesmerized. “It was love at first sight,” (p. 14) he declares.

This event was an epiphany, a moment of illumination where past history and present experience meet and point the way forward. Here as elsewhere in the text Marsh opens his life and human struggle in much the same way he opens the skull and proceeds to remove a tumor or blockage in the brain: with dexterity, precision, compassion, and skill. This focus is sustained throughout the text. And here lies also another likeness to Harvey Cushing, one of the most literary of American doctors of the twentieth century, where the discipline and rigor of the operating room and the research laboratory are “translated” into the use of language. In this way both physician-writers discover words and images that are then selected and organized to convey sought after meaning.

Probably the most disconcerting content of Marsh’s book lies in its descriptions of what are called euphemistically “complications” denoting medical and surgical errors and failure. It is always difficult to see heroes as fallen or failing beings, and surgeons, especially neurosurgeons, are particularly prone to idealizations by themselves, their students, and others. And well they might be idealized given that so much of what they do can and does appear miraculous. But then comes the fall to self-awareness of weakness and sometimes near despair. Marsh is brutally frank about how dreadful he feels and how haunted he is by his mistakes, his errors in judgment, his fits of anger, and his unfair criticisms of those closest to him. Here again he resembles Harvey Cushing who was known to brood and become depressed if he believed he failed a patient and was given to harsh verbal treatment of his students and family members. We learn also that before surgery Marsh is afraid to the point of paralysis before entering the operating theater. Once an operation begins, however, he is suffused with a sense of absolute concentration and deep joy in the endeavor. His description of his entry into surgery sounds like the one given of the Broadway star Rex Harrison who because of stage fright had to be quite literally pushed out on stage to assume the role of Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. Once launched Harrison would then follow with a bravura performance.

In a related matter, Marsh’s expresses biting, often hilarious criticism of the National Health Service for which he works in Britain as Consultant Neurosurgeon at Atkinson Morleys/St. George’s Hospital in London. Accounts of his periodic confrontations with NHS is one of the delights of the book especially if one has been subject to or has observed at close quarters the chronic myopia and grating self-importance of some hospital administrators. Even here Marsh’s penchant for introspection and self-criticism follows him as he describes his own anxiety and fears of authority when called down to office of the administration and senior managers of his institution to receive a reprimand or warning for disobedient or insolent behavior. He likens his inner experience of these occasions to his being ordered to appear at the headmaster’s office at his public school for having committed some infraction or other. Such an occasion would fill him with similar angst and resentment. A reader who has experienced anything similar to what Marsh describes will identify immediately.

We learn some things, though not a great deal, about Marsh’s family members and his own medical history. He was married, divorced, and now happily remarried to Kate. We know he has two grown children, Sarah and William, and that he has had his own encounters with being a patient with eye surgery and a broken leg. We meet a whole cast of supporting characters vital to Marsh’s professional life including Gail, Judith, Mike, and Igor all of whom admire and are loyal to their chief even at his most trying moments. We know Marsh’s father suffered from dementia and that Marsh reconciled with him realizing

that any of the expectations his father might have had for him came out of the best of intentions for his son. He writes eloquently of his mother's last days suffering from the cancer that took her life. He sees in her passing a deep and lasting reminder of what it is like to grow old in the midst of indignities when life is coming to a close. In all these portrayals there is little evidence of a vaunted British stiff upper lip.

For Marsh these events and people remind him that his own years are mounting up. His powers of recollection are sharpened so that he can say and must tell us what has really mattered to him. Sometimes this evocation rises to the level of poetry. One such example is his description of his and his first wife's response to the hospitalization and brain surgery for their infant son, William. It is a risky surgery that Henry Marsh knows well. He writes

My wife and I spent the next few weeks in that strange world one enters when you fear for your child's life – the outside world, the real world, becomes a ghost world, and the people in it, remote and indistinct. The only reality is intense fear, a fear driven by helpless, overwhelming love. (p. 108)

This is what Hemingway meant with his reference to the importance of "one true sentence." It is that place where writer and reader together share a bond forged in common suffering and love.

There are memorable descriptions of various diseases and surgeries. Each short chapter has a title like "Meningioma" or "Leucotomy" along with more well know words for chapter titles such as "Trauma" or "Carcinoma." Each is outlined with brief, lucid language. The chapters are both self-contained and at the same time drive the narrative forward even as they feel logical and well placed in relation to one another.

The scope and force of Henry Marsh's memoir is similar to that of two truly great autobiographies: Augustine's *Confessions* and *The Education of Henry Adams*. All three describe how each of their central figures must create a bridge between an inner world of introspection and one of outward action. All tell a story of a lengthy apprenticeship and coming-of-age necessary for discovering a purpose in life. Augustine, Henry Adams, and Marsh are all parts of families of origin demanding of them searching exploration. All three are plagued with doubt and a lurking sense of failure. And all become forces to be reckoned with in their respective callings and in society.

Henry Marsh's *Do No Harm* compels the attention of any reader seeking to understand something about the ordeal and satisfaction of becoming a healer through the medium of excellence in personal narrative writing.