

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA
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Dearest grandchild,

Yesterday was “April Fool’s Day”. It made me think of a quote by Anatole France who said that the world has been saved by those whom it considered to be madmen”. He was right! Jesus was considered “beside Himself” and Festus said to Paul “Much learning doth make thee mad”. Unfortunately, history is replete with many other examples.

I wrote the following article many years ago but it is still true. I especially want you to be familiar with stories like this for they illustrate that educated people can sometimes be as prejudiced as the ignorant people they disdain. Truly, Dr. Ignaz Phillip Semmelweis was considered a madman and died in an insane asylum. He is however said to have done more for the mothers of this world than any person other than Jesus Christ. He was a pioneer in medicine and the way he was persecuted provides an important lesson.

Dr. Semmelweis was born in 1818 and died in 1865. When nobody accepted the evidence he presented he fell into a deep depression and wrote the following words:

“When I with my present conviction look back upon the past, I can only dispel the sadness which falls upon me by gazing into the happy future when wherein the laying-in hospitals, and also outside of them, throughout the whole world, childbed fever will be no more . . . but, if it is not vouchsafed me to look upon that happy time with my own eyes, from which misfortune may God preserve me, the conviction that such a time must inevitably sooner or later arrive, will cheer my dying hour.”

In his day the death of mothers in childbirth was routine. The finest hospitals in Vienna, where Dr. Semmelweis worked, lost one out of every six women in childbirth. Their deaths were attributed to an infection labeled as “childbed fever”. This was an era of unbelievable ignorance. The hospitals were filled with filth but no one dared to associate this with deadly infections. The doctors began their daily routine in the dissecting room performing autopsies on those who had died during the preceding 24 hours. Then, without ever washing their hands, they would proceed to the hospital and make pelvic examinations on expectant mothers. Dr. Semmelweis made an association between these examinations and the fatal infections which followed. Chlorine has recently been discovered and Dr. Semmelweis required all doctors to wash their hands in a chlorine solution before entering the hospital. After 11 out of 12 women died in the same room, he became even more stringent and required the doctors to wash after every examination. The doctors resented this and insisted that as long as they used vaseline the patient was safe. As a result of their complaints Dr. Semmelweis was fired!

Since he was a Hungarian by birth, Dr. Semmelweis left Vienna and moved to Budapest. Again he brought in his chlorine basins, and again he was fired. Next he opened his own clinic and kept careful records. In eleven years he supervised the delivery of 8,537 babies. Only 184 mothers died. This mortality rate is comparable to our own. He published his findings in a book titled: “The

Etiology, the Concept, and the Prophylaxis fo Childbed Fever”. Again, his evidence was ridiculed and he was rejected.

Morton Thompson, in his book “The Cry and the Covenant” records these words of Dr. Semmelweis which he delivered to a medical society on June 15, 1848. *“I have now shown on three occasions before this body, that puerperal fever is caused by decomposed material conveyed to a wound. I have shown that it is a pyemia, a pus in the blood. I have shown that a man can infect a woman with this pyemia, and that man can infect another man with it - for so Koletschka died. I have shown that it can arise after surgery as well as after childbirth, and in the non-pregnant as well as the pregnant. I have shown that it can be prevented. I have shown how it can be prevented. I have proved all that I have said with facts, with records, with laboratory experiments and with human beings. I have talked a great deal, but while we talk and talk, gentlemen, women are dying and doctors are killing them. There is no lying-in hospital where women are not dying of childbed fever, and their children with them. And we talk gentlemen. We talk, and talk, and talk. And it is not necessary to talk. I am not asking anything world shaking. I am asking you only to wash . In the name of pity - stop the murder of mothers gentlemen. Wash your hands. Wash everything that contacts a patient. Stop this murder! For God’s sake wash your hands”.*

In despair he passed out literature on the streets. The evidence was clear and undeniable, but still nobody believed him. His last desperate act before being committed to an insane asylum was to go into the dissecting room and deliberately infect himself with “childbed fever”. He did this by slashing the stomach of a cadaver, and then slashing his own finger. He then deliberately placed his bleeding finger in the deadly contamination of the corpse. It was at this point that he was committed to an insane asylum. It was there that he died a short time later with his hand rotting off and the death rattle of a thousand women ringing in his ears. He was only 47 years of age. His son, Bela, committed suicide at the age of 25 despairing that his father’s teaching would never be accepted.

Later, in a more enlightened era, Sir William Joppa Sinclair, professor of Gynecology and Obstetrics, from the University of Manchester, wrote: *“The great revolution of modern times in obstetrics as well as in surgery is the result of the one idea that, complete and clear, first arose in the mind of Semmelweis and was embodied in the practice of which he was the pioneer . . .”*

The late Roy Weece lamented that many Christians have had their faith “smiled away”. Often the “experts” in positions of power merely laugh at those who disagree. No need for evidence to destroy someone. No need for truth. Only laughter! Please don’t let anyone destroy you with something as insulting and insignificant as a condescending smile.

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce