

Memorial Address

Memorial Service for Professor Sir Martin Roth

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Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge, UK

Amidst the beautiful readings and prayers today and after Fauré's Sanctus, it is a daunting task to have to speak in plain speech. We will shortly hear the sublime words of the Jewish Memorial Prayer to set before the God of mercy and compassion "all the meritorious and pious deeds which Martin did on earth". This is a man who, among his meritorious deeds, had at 37 published a textbook which defined Psychiatry for a generation, at 42 helped work out the WHO classification of psychiatric disorders, at 49 worked out the pathological basis of dementia, at 54 had been founding President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and had been honoured with a knighthood at 55.

Many would have been proud of any one of these as their life-time's achievement. Was there anything left for him to do after that? He went on to become foundation Professor of Psychiatry at Cambridge and Fellow of this Trinity College at 60. And then, in his late 60's, went on to help work out the molecular basis of Alzheimer's disease and the theoretical basis of a treatment, and was honoured again by his election as Fellow of the Royal Society at 79.

I should simply fall silent in gratitude for the privilege of having accompanied such a man as a pupil, colleague and friend for the last 25 years. It is only friendship and love which give me the audacity to speak, and I do so on behalf of us all. Here, we are all drawn together for a moment in love, friendship, collegiality and admiration, united in the face of that leveller of all human achievement, death. There is an almost animal instinct at work here, that draws us together to share our sense of loss, for some of a husband/father/grandfather,

for some of a colleague or teacher, for some their physician, and for some just a friend. Yet we are to come away with an ability to let go, and for the sense of loss to be transformed into joy and celebration at having enjoyed the gift of such a man among us, that we had a share in his full life, a life well lived and well spent, the good life of a good man.

The family asks us to consider Sir Martin's life as laid down in Ecclesiasticus. "Treat the physician with honour", we are told, "because we have need of him, and because his gift comes from the Most High." We are told that "God gave skill to men that He (God) might be glorified in His marvellous works."

Sir Martin fulfilled the type of the good physician. I particularly remember an occasion when I was training, and he helped me with the assessment of a dishevelled, filthy schizophrenic woman. He spoke to her with such extraordinary kindness and respect for her person, I should actually say with such love, compassion and understanding for her pain, that I was deeply moved by what I saw. Because we are frail and afraid, may we all fall when we have need into the hands of a good physician, just such as Sir Martin was.

The poems the family has chosen to read emphasise beauty, which "will never pass into nothingness", and love, which "lives beyond the tomb". They are telling us through these verses the essence of what Sir Martin was to them, and to me in his work and in friendship. They are telling us that it is these qualities: his high sense of the loveliness of things, of the duty of compassion for those who suffer, of the need for fundamental integrity and loyalty in ones dealings, that these

qualities were the bedrock of what he was. In a way, they are also telling us that these are the lasting things. When I conjure up Sir Martin in my mind, these are the qualities I have the clearest sense of, that gave him such loveliness as a man.

But let us turn to the physician's more objective skills. He had chosen to study Medicine before he left school, and did so at St. Mary's in London both as student and as House Officer. It was the distinguished neurologist, Sir Russel, later Lord Brain at the Maida Vale Hospital, who helped direct his brilliant young Senior Registrar into his life's path, not in neurology but in psychiatry. Sir Martin always retained a deep respect and affection for Brain, that I share in my turn for Sir Martin, as befits that wise and good teacher who helps one discover one's mission in life. His higher training, which he had completed by 33, was at the Maida Vale and Maudesley Hospitals in London, and then the Crichton Royal Hospital in Dumfries.

The very first papers he wrote, towards the end of his training, were to define immediately two of the fundamental themes of his life's work. The first dealt with the interplay between clinical picture, history and heredity in reaching the correct diagnosis and classification of mental illness. "Correct classification is the first step towards understanding causation," he would say. The next expressed what was to be his life-long interest in anxiety and depression.

During his first substantive post, where he stayed for 5 years at the Graylingwell Hospital in Chichester, he began to lay the foundations of what was to be his main scientific contribution to psychiatry. Having understood that the diagnosis and classification of mental disorders in the elderly was in a state of confusion riddled with empty generalities, he formulated a five-fold classification which still stands today. He showed that Alzheimer's disease and dementia due to strokes were distinct from the other three classes on account of rapid mental decline and high death rate. The prevailing psychiatric wisdom, expressed in the rag-bag concept of "senile psychosis", which carries the implication that you become mad simply through becoming old, was therefore false.

The seeds of his textbook were also planted very early on. He had trained at the Maudsely with Eliot Slater, a brilliant and creative psychiatrist with a strong respect for the empirical sciences, and for statistics in particular acquired from his teacher at St. John's, the eminent statistician R. A. Fisher. At the Crichton, he had trained with Willi Mayer-Gross, a refugee from Nazi Germany who brought with him a deep understanding

of the rich psychiatric phenomenology of the pre-war German tradition. Mayer-Gross and Slater invited the young Martin Roth at the age of 32 to join them in the preparation of an entirely new comprehensive Textbook of Clinical Psychiatry. The aim was to combine both the Slater and the Mayer-Gross strands to achieve a new synthesis in the face of the prevailing Freudian orthodoxy. It took them 5 years to complete this monumental task. The result was a brilliant success. The first edition appeared in 1954 when Sir Martin was 37, and it continued with new editions and revisions until 1977, and was translated into Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, and American. This textbook set a stamp on British psychiatry for 30 years. It was written with immense erudition and humanity, and an underlying hunger to achieve a coherent scientific understanding of the nature of mental illness.

From the textbook and his research came fame and influence. After appointment as Professor Psychological Medicine at Newcastle at the age of 39, the Chair he was to occupy for 21 years, he set about creating one of the strongest Psychiatric research departments in the country. At 42 he began his work with the World Health Organisation, contributing over time to the creation of the ICD classification system of psychiatric disorders, and then to the standard diagnostic system of US psychiatry, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, DSM. At 47 he was appointed as a member of the Medical Research Council, where he used his influence to help develop Psychiatric research throughout the country.

He worked for 10 years to help create the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 1971. His contribution was recognised by his election as the first President of the College. We gain a sense of his personal charisma and charm when we picture him, having won over the then Minister of Health, Keith Joseph, and Lord Goodman who raised the money, all together, I picture them crammed in a London taxi, searching around London for a suitable property to house the new College. They settled on the house and mews in Belgrave Square which remains the home of the College. The College accreditation system, both of psychiatrists and psychiatric hospitals, became a powerful engine for raising and maintaining professional standards throughout the country. His research, scholarship and contributions to Psychiatry were recognised in the knighthood awarded to him in 1972 at the age of 55.

I will not go on to detail all his further research and the many honours he received. If you read his curriculum vitae, there are 2 pages of mostly 1-per-line listings of his Academic, Professional and Civic

Honours. We were told in Ecclesiasticus that “The skill of the physician lifts up his head, and in the presence of great men he is admired.” And Sir Martin was indeed very much honoured and much admired.

Two years after his period as College President ended, at the age of 60, he decided to start a new life, as the foundation Professor of Psychiatry at the new School of Clinical Medicine in Cambridge. Here he plunged himself into scholarship, writing and research. This was a golden time in his life, when he was at the pinnacle of his intellectual powers and eminence, which I shared with him as his PhD student from 1981. He was immensely proud of the work we did together in Alzheimer’s disease.

Alzheimer had discovered a lesion in the brain which he called the Neurofibrillary Tangle, and from this the disease is called “Alzheimer’s disease”. From his seminal research in Newcastle, Sir Martin established a correlation between the load of Alzheimer’s tangles in the brain and degree of clinical dementia. From this correlation, he became convinced that understanding Alzheimer’s tangle held the key to developing a treatment.

The real crux of the matter, as Sir Martin used to say, was to “seize the Tangle by the throat”. To this end, he enlisted the help of Sir Aaron Klug, and I was summarily dispatched to the Laboratory of Molecular Biology to solve the problem of Alzheimer’s tangle. With colleagues there it took us 5 years to work this out, and then another 7 years to work out the theoretical basis of a treatment.

But research of the kind Sir Martin wanted needs much more than a spot of good luck at the laboratory bench. He was after the big game: finding a treatment based on Alzheimer’s tangle. In the event, bringing Sir Martin’s dream to fruition has needed £25 m to be raised, not in a highly risk averse UK investment environment, but in Singapore, setting up a research group of some 70 people, and for me a PhD project lasting 25 years. By a curious providence, the data from our first clinical trial in some 200 subjects are to be unblinded in just a few weeks time. 25 years on, I will finally get to learn whether Sir Martin’s basic intuition was right or wrong. The sadness is that he will not be with us now either to share the exhilaration if it works, or help pick up the pieces if it doesn’t.

Sir Martin taught by his own life and example how to forge the new in the face entrenched opinion and opposition. I would often come away from discussions with him, that began in darkness and despondency, seeing again more clearly what the real business of academic psychiatry and discovery is, why it is good, why it must be done. Sir Martin was not overtly religious, and would not have put it as we have heard it today, but in fact he was teaching day by day that “healing comes from the Most High”, that “The Lord created medicines from the earth . . . to heal and take away pain”, that “He gave skill to men that He might be glorified in his works”. But he taught this, not in sweetness and light, but by bitter struggle and a fundamental mental toughness. He too had to encounter many bitter opponents, and also the thieves and free-riders who are hungry for easy money or recognition. He taught that we have no choice but to find the courage, tenacity and mental toughness to advance directly into enemy fire.

I will conclude with a cartoon drawn by a gifted illustrator in the Laboratory of Molecular Biology. It was commissioned and inspired by our colleague, Elizabeta Mukaetova-Ladinska on the occasion of Sir Martin’s 75th birthday. It shows Sir Martin on horseback with a very determined look on his face, setting off out of the castle into the unknown. Elizabeta is shown as the distressed damsel behind him on the horse. In front to the left, there is Charles Harrington in a kilt piping us out, ever the loyal and stalwart companion, and to the right, there is me, a monk, carrying a sort of misshapen tau-cross with dead rats dangling from it, looking very worried and uncertain. On Sir Martin’s shield is the device: “Cerebrum Magnum”. The caption reads: “The quest for the gold brain begins!” The crowd in the castle are all shouting: “Hooray for Sir Martin!”. And so do I too conclude: Hooray, Hooray and again Hooray for Sir Martin!

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