

Remonstrance, Apostrophe, and Valedictory

By J.S. King

Now comes the time when I must bid you adieu, leaving you in the hands of Cosmas and Damion (the patron saints of medicine) and of my successor, who has my best wishes. He will find that the laws of Parkinson, Murphy, et al. apply with a vengeance, especially these:

- nothing is as easy as it looks;
- everything takes longer than you think it will;
- if anything can go wrong, it will;
- nothing is impossible for the man who doesn't have to do it himself; and, of course,
- the last person who quit or was fired will be held responsible for everything that goes wrong—until the next person quits or is fired.

On the other hand, my successor will find the work easy and challenging in some ways. Because his handiwork is invisible, he can, like most professionals, work only as hard as his conscience dictates. There will be intervals of sheer tedium, such as seeing an evaluation of the *n*th procedure for serum glucose. He must resign himself to these as he would resign himself on looking up from the operating table and finding that his surgeon is parkinsonian. Everything is done indoors, and no heavy lifting is involved. He will have an opportunity not to add to the world's extraordinary profusion of injustice. His objectivity must be beyond question.

Intellectually, an editor can be the lowest common denominator in a sense: if he cannot understand what an author is trying to say, then a good many other readers probably also cannot, so something needs fixing. He should continually try to think of ways to make this journal more interesting and more useful, but he must be as convincing as a seductress and must make his bosses believe that any change he suggests is really *their* idea if he is to have any realistic chance of it being effected.

He should remember, but never say out loud, that he is working for you, the readers, and not, in the final analysis, only to please contributors or the various panjandrums who hold sway over him, most of whom are convinced that the job is a simple one and are confident that they could do better than he.

If he (and the reviewers) do their job properly—i.e., do not merely dispense soothing unction—he (and they) occasionally will evoke the wrath of an author. This is not surprising for one who, in effect, makes his living by criticizing other people's babies. The wrath usually vanishes once the paper is printed—the smiling baby now appearing in ribbons and bows, with all (or most) surface defects missing.

He should be prejudiced in favor of excellence, which usually simply means taking extra pains.

He will deal with some incredibly careless authors who never trouble to learn and will be content to allow him to spend more time editing their papers than they did writing them. Such contributors, like a recalcitrant mule, will need hitting with a figurative plank to get their attention. (It isn't called a "discipline" for nothing.)

He will be certain of a spiritual life at least once a month when—*mirabile dictu*—the journal appears, an achievement buttressed by a monthly backup stack of paper as high as himself.

So much for sage admonition and alarums. Such platitudes hardly need illumination, and I apologize for rehearsing them.

Of the sundry employers I have had over the years, none has, on the whole, been as kind, supportive, and pleasant to work for as have the officers and members of this Association. Not the least of the fringe benefits has been the freedom (license?) to put in this space, every month, anything that fancy dictates, especially my prejudices with respect to government stupidity, bureaucratic interference in our lives, throwaway journals, careless authors, and megalomaniacs.

(Mark Twain said: "It may be thought that I am prejudiced. Perhaps I am. I would be ashamed of myself if I were not.")

Honors and kind words were bestowed on me last July at the national meeting (and, during these last months, by many contributors). I am grateful. I especially thank Drs. Carl Burtis and Jack Ladenson for their role in a particular surprise: a scholarship in my name granted by the Association to Berea College, that unique Kentucky work/study school where, in Depression days, one of my jobs was in the College Press.¹ There I acquired, along with the prewar part of my education, an unusual appreciation for the mechanics of how the printed word is produced (what changes since then!) and how it can be made more aesthetically pleasing.

Being Executive Editor of this journal (and, for a time, AACC's Executive Director) has been the world's best job. But now, after 243 months, the sacred fires have cooled a little. Someone is needed who is closer to the laboratory bench. And I sense

that the days of the conventional printed scientific journal (costwise a relatively inefficient way of communicating information)² may be numbered.

I have been unusually blessed with skilled and dedicated colleagues in this editorial office, for most of the years two and never more than three,³ to whom I cannot give enough credit for their diligence and cheerful tolerance of sometimes unreasonable demands.⁴

I must also thank the thousands of reviewers, who have kept us on the right path.

When I compare volume 16, no. 1, with current issues, I can only be proud—of us and of you. May your profession continue this astonishing evolution! You are benefactors to the world, continually making your part of health care more cost-efficient, reliable, and effective. It has been a long time now since the physician could validly choose to believe only those results that fit his or her preconceptions, if those results emanate from a good laboratory.

¹During 1920-1980, 134-year-old Berea, which is committed to and draws most of its 1500 students from the farms and coal fields of Southern Appalachia, reportedly ranked second in the South (33rd in the nation) in the proportion of graduates who went on to earn doctorates. It was rated by *U.S. News and World Report* the number one U.S. college in its category for the third consecutive time in 1988. (In 1988 and 1989, Wake Forest University, here in Winston-Salem, ranked no. 1 in its category.) In 1989, it ranked third in a more-comprehensive category. With no tuition, it costs the average freshman the least [thanks to endowments, gifts (nearly \$12 million last year), scholarships, and the work program] of any U.S. college, except for the military/naval/air force academies, for which of course you, the taxpayers, foot the bills.

²Studies show that a small proportion of any journal's contents is read and used by any given reader. See also "Has the medical journal a future?" (Lock S, *Trans Med Soc Lond* 1987:52).

³A prominent medical journal with a similar number of text pages, far less well edited than this one in terms of observing international recommendations, lists a staff of 35 on its masthead. But then there are more of them (i.e., physicians) than us, and they're a good deal richer.

⁴An example: the thankless task of typing in camera-ready form the entire text of one of the 35 or so AACC books that have been prepared for press in this office. Another: the agonies of "computerizing" this office, which, once accomplished, has proved gratifying. It is a satisfaction to leave such a congenial and smoothly functioning office.

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CORRECTION

In the essay announcing *Current Contents on Diskette*® with Abstracts (*Current Contents* (19):5-9, 13 May 1991), the last paragraph on page 8 contained an incorrect toll free number to call for information about the product. The correct number is: 1-800-336-4474, operator 257. We regret any inconvenience this may have caused.