

WALKER PERCY, BURNOUT, AND

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I made straight A's and flunked ordinary living.

—Walker Percy¹

On the 100th anniversary of his birth, Walker Percy is best remembered as a novelist, though he was trained as a physician. He described his professional trajectory as a shift from the “physiological

and pathological processes with man's body,” to “the problem of man himself, the nature and destiny of man; specifically and most immediately, the predicament of man in a modern technological society.”¹

Though he has been dead for more than 25 years, his critique of the problems of modern life remains trenchant today.

A difficult start in life

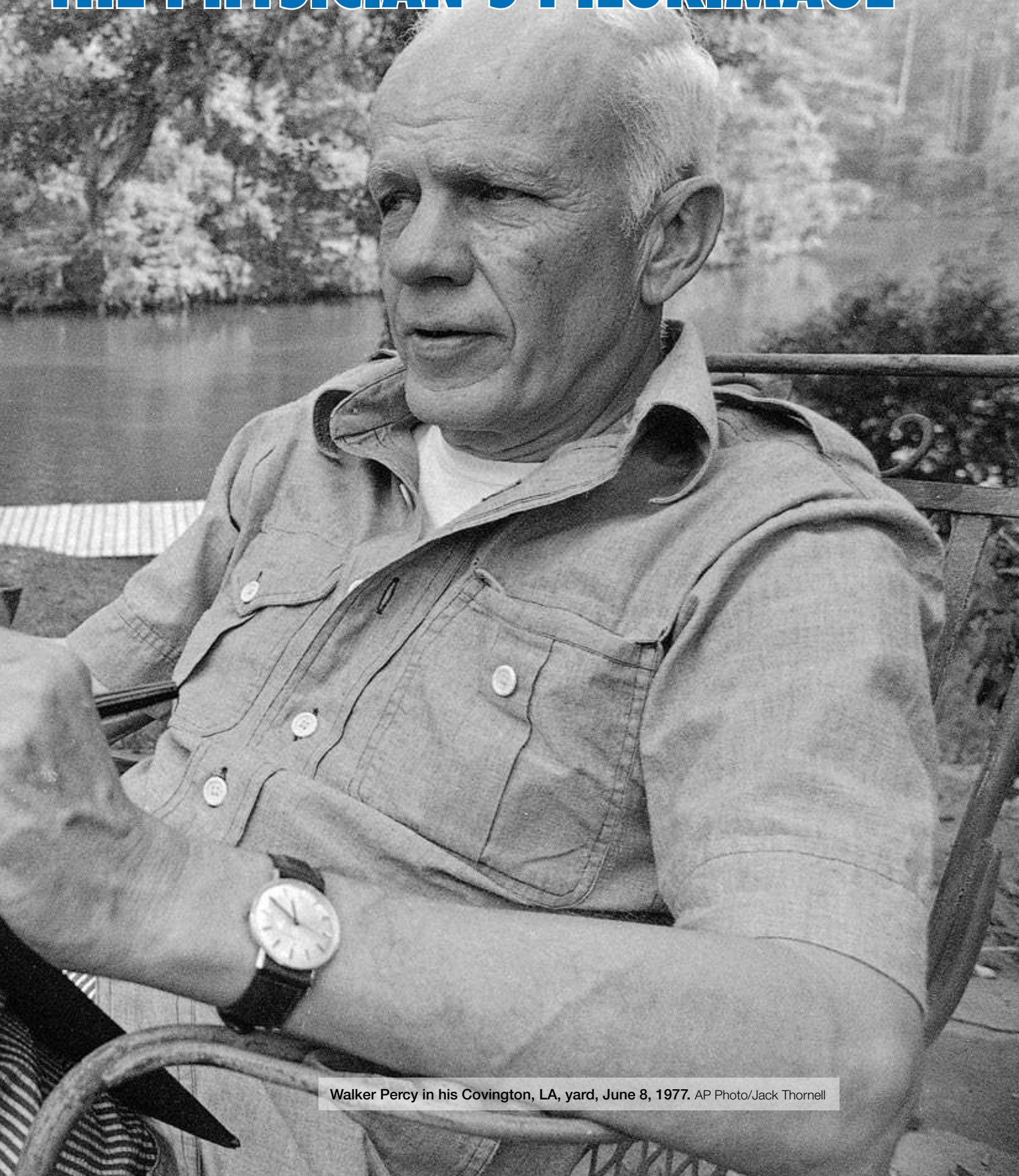
Born in Birmingham, Alabama, Percy's uncle was a former U.S. Senator, and his grandfather had been widely regarded as a hero of the Civil War.

When Percy was an infant, his grandfather took his own life, and when he was 13-years-old, his father did the same. Two years later, his mother died in an automobile accident that Percy regarded as a suicide.

Percy and his two younger brothers were raised by



THE PHYSICIAN'S PILGRIMAGE



Walker Percy in his Covington, LA, yard, June 8, 1977. AP Photo/Jack Thornell

their father's cousin, William Percy, a lawyer and man of letters, whose circle of associates included the writers William Faulkner, Langston Hughes, and Robert Penn Warren. William Percy edited the *Yale Younger Poets* series and penned the best-selling autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee*.

It was while living with his uncle that Percy met his life-long best friend, the writer and historian Shelby Foote.

When Percy and Foote were young, they made a pilgrimage to Oxford, Mississippi, to meet Faulkner. Foote enjoyed the conversation immensely, but Percy remained in the car. He was so in awe of the great man that he could not bear to approach him.

Percy later attended the University of North Carolina, then studied medicine at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, graduating in 1941.

A writer is born

Though initially interested in psychiatry, Percy decided to pursue training in pathology.

While working at Bellevue Hospital, he contracted tuberculosis, and was sent for several years to a sanatorium. He later described his illness as an event that, "did not so much change my life as give me leave to change it."¹

While in the sanatorium, he immersed himself in great books, including the writings of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky.

Having inherited property from his family, he was able to devote the majority of his time to reading and writing, and in the 1950s published a number of essays in academic and literary journals. During this time, Percy also composed his first two novels, neither of which was published.

However, in 1959, an editor at The Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group received the manuscript that became *The Moviegoer*, which after multiple revisions, was published in 1961, and won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1962, beating out Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

Percy's other novels include *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987).

He also published a number of nonfiction works, including *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (1975), *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (1983), and the posthumously published *Signposts in a Strange Land* (1991).

Percy discovered John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), a riotously humorous picaresque novel,

which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1981. In his forward to the book, Percy describes the deceased author's mother's insistence that he read the manuscript:

The lady was persistent, and it somehow came to pass that she stood in my office handing me the hefty manuscript. There was no getting out of it; only one hope remained—that I could read a few pages and that they would be bad enough for me, in good conscience, to read no farther. Usually I can do just that. Indeed the first paragraph often suffices. My only fear was that this one might not be bad enough, or might be just good enough, so that I would have to keep reading. In this case I read on. And on. First with the sinking feeling that it was not bad enough to quit, then with a prickle of interest, then a growing excitement, and finally an incredulity: surely it was not possible that it was so good.²

Percy is one of the few writers who can claim to have won a Pulitzer Prize for another author.

Like Percy's *The Moviegoer*, *A Confederacy of Dunces* recounts the exploits of a 30-year-old man based in New Orleans. And, like *The Moviegoer's* protagonist Binx Bolling, Toole's Ignatius J. O'Reilly senses that he does not quite fit into the world, though O'Reilly suspects that his travails reflect the agency of some higher power.

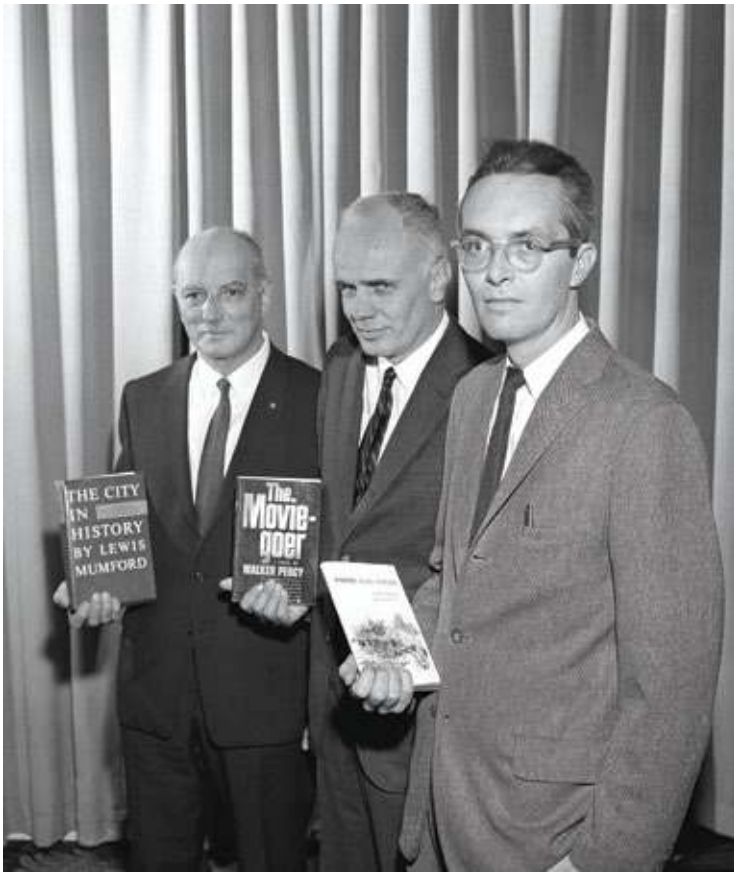
Binx, however, traces his sense of dislocation to the human condition itself, which prompts him to set off on a search:

What is the nature of the search? Really it is very simple; at least for a fellow like me. So simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life.³

Many contemporary physicians know a similar sense of dislocation. Like Binx, they appear successful, but they are burdened by a lack of enthusiasm, feelings of ineffectiveness, and even a sense of meaninglessness. Studies have indicated that as many as 46 percent of physicians are burned out, with the highest rates in critical care and emergency medicine.⁴ Likewise, it is estimated that at least half of all medical students develop burnout at some point during their studies.⁵

Percy's Diagnosis

Throughout his writings, Percy sheds light on aspects of contemporary medical practice—and life—which often



1962 National Book Awards recipients, from left, Lewis Mumford, Walker Percy, and Alan Dugan. AP Photo



Walker Percy accepted the Pulitzer Prize on behalf of the late John Kennedy Toole for his novel *A Confederacy Of Dunces*.

become so routine they are no longer noticed. Percy believed that no one can rightly understand what it means to become a physician unless it is conceived of as a journey or pilgrimage.

Too often, educational curricula, instructional methods, and assessment techniques are so tightly constructed that learners have difficulty salvaging the human being—the doctor or the patient—from the educational package in which they are presented.⁶ A good doctor needs to understand that there is more to sickness and health, life and death, than the textbooks suggest.

Beneath every diagnosis and treatment plan lies a real human being, and caring for patients requires that sufficient attention be paid to both the biological and psychological aspects of their being. While biomedical science has achieved many new anatomical, physiological, and pathological insights, Percy argued, there are many respects in which, “We don’t seem to know much more about the psyche than Plato did.”⁷

To realize that a patient is dying raises many of the same fundamental questions about the meaning of life as it did 2,500 years ago. Merely doing well in school is insufficient, because it is possible to say, “I made straight

As and flunked ordinary living.⁸ Students need to work hard to retain a deep engagement and avoid at all costs the impulse to simply “shrug it off.”³

For those who believe that they are here to enjoy the things money can buy, Percy offered a radically different perspective. He believed that the greatest danger in life is not failing, but succeeding to such an extent that you stop asking questions.

Both Plato and Aristotle said that the pursuit of wisdom begins in wonder. This implies that one of the greatest pitfalls before us is complacency, the sense that we already know everything we need to know. Through his writings, Percy worked to evoke a sense of wonder, the realization that we are being confronted by something for which it is difficult to give an account.

Percy regarded patients and physicians not only as biological organisms or consumers, but primarily as “wayfarers.”¹ Before standing any chance of finding a better way, they must first recognize that they are lost, or at least not on the right path.

Percy described his fiction as “diagnostic.”¹ Not that he is assigning medical diagnoses to his characters (and by extension, his readers), but that his writings can help to



The moviegoer in the center with his leg outstretched is Walker Percy, a freshman at the University of North Carolina when the photo was taken.

Courtesy North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library

recognize what is missing, or out of order in our lives. The principal problem, he argued, is that we have lost our sense of wonder at the world and ourselves.

Percy insisted that the meaning of life is not a scientific but a metaphysical question, for which only metaphysical methods would suffice. His novels represent an attempt to “incarnate such ideas in person and place.”¹

Is it not indeed more wonderful to understand the complex mechanisms by which the DNA of a sperm joins with the DNA of an ovum to form a new organism than to have God snap his fingers and create an organism like a rabbit under a hat. Instead of dismissing such matter, we should seek to cultivate a frame of mind in which we recognize that an ordinary butterfly is a creature of immense beauty and value.⁷

Percy said the same about consciousness, including the wonder of our own desire to know, something for which he argues science can never account:

Please tell me how it came to pass that matter in interaction, a sequence of energy exchanges, neurons firing other neurons like a computer, can result in my being conscious,

having a self, and being able to utter sentences which are more or less true and which you can understand?”⁷

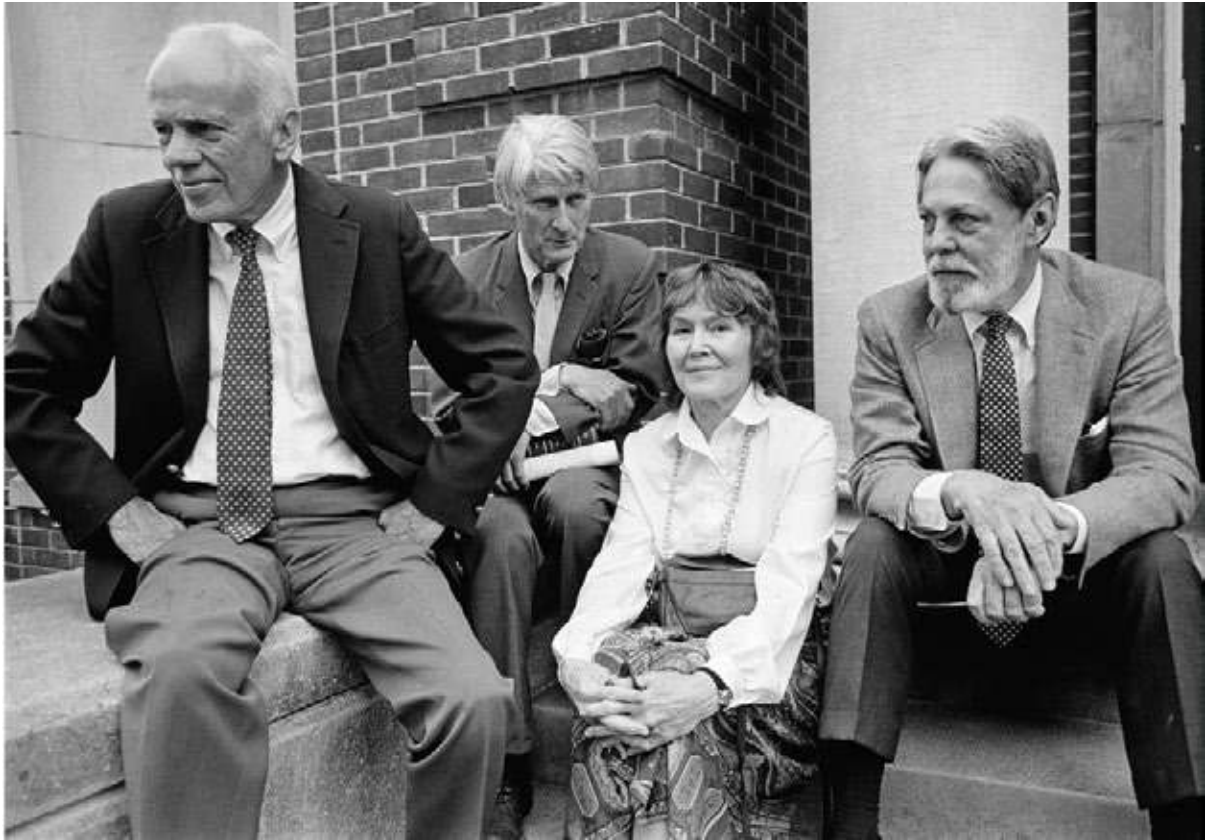
Phenomena such as consciousness and language can never be accounted for in strictly scientific terms, any more than the sensation of being in love can be explained away in terms of hormones, or Raphael’s *Orleans Madonna* is simply a property of paint and color.¹

Percy’s Therapy

Percy wanted to snap people out of the “everydayness” of life; the merely going through the motions that produces an existential torpor. The solution, he believed lies, at least in part, in disasters.

From the Latin for “losing one’s star,” a disaster strips away many of the accretions of comfort, allowing for the ability see the essentials more clearly. In the words of Leo Tolstoy, “Truth is obtained, like gold, not by letting it grow bigger but by washing off from it everything that is not gold.”⁹ It is, “the wreck of the eight-fifteen,” wrote Percy, which enables us to discover “our fellow commuter as a comrade.”⁶

In this respect, comfort and security work to our disadvantage; he asked, “Why did Mother Teresa think that affluent Westerners often seemed poorer than the Calcutta



From left, Walker Percy, Charles Bell, Ellen Douglas, and Shelby Foote in Mississippi, 1982.
D. L. Gorton/The New York Times

beggar?”⁷ It is in the midst of a catastrophe—a natural disaster, a serious illness, or the breakup of a relationship—that we see most clearly what is really worth living for.

Through his novels and essays, Percy means to help us understand what such a predicament feels like, to put us in the shoes of a person in the midst of a crisis, and thereby open our eyes.

The highest role of the educator is the maieutic role of Socrates: to help the student come to himself not as a consumer of experience but as a sovereign individual.⁶

That we could somehow educate future physicians by downloading knowledge and skills into their heads would transform the practice of medicine from an art that calls on the very best a human being has to offer into a mere technical or industrial process to which the physician need contribute little or nothing.

More than a matter of physiology, learning to see is a matter of narrative. To a great extent, we see only what our stories prepare us to see. If we operate with truly robust accounts of what a patient is, and needs, and what a doctor is, and is capable of providing, then the practice of medicine can thrive.

If, however, we operate with defective narratives that present patients as nothing more than biological specimens, or consumers, then both patients and physicians will be left feeling hollow. It is not so much a matter of figuring life out, as it is discovering what it means to be truly present in living. Kierkegaard wrote that even someone who figures out himself and the universe perfectly by noon still faces the problem of living out the rest of the day.¹

Percy had a healthy respect for science’s limits. Science focuses on things that can be seen, dissected, weighed, and measured. By contrast, he said, many of the most real things in life, such as the self and the consciousness, “cannot be seen as things or measured as energy exchanges.”¹

This does not mean that we should turn away from science, but it does call for other ways of knowing—ways that do not ignore, or deny many of life’s most vital and immediate experiences. Science can keep diseased hearts beating, and kill cancer cells, but it “has not one word to say about what it means to be born a man, or a woman, to live, and to die.”¹

Today many medical students and physicians are struggling with burnout, depression, substance abuse, mental illness, and a sense that they no longer find the practice of medicine rewarding. As a diagnostician, Percy aimed



Walker Percy, 1987. Bettmann

to uncover the roots of these problems, which cannot be found in purely economic, political, or even pharmacologic domains.

To believe otherwise would be to focus solely on symptoms. Instead, Percy said anxiety and depression might be trying to tell us something we don't understand—"a sort of warning or summons to the self."¹ The problem is that by the time such a disorder becomes easy to diagnose, it is very often quite difficult to do anything about it.

Percy aimed to catch his readers at an earlier stage, when the diagnosis is more difficult, but there is still time to provide an effective remedy. The *Moviegoer's* Binx seems to have it all—successful stockbroker, war veteran, and lady's man—yet, he is plagued by an inner sense of emptiness that propels him along in a quest for a more meaningful life.

Over the course of his journey, Binx catches glimpses of the sources of burnout, and develops a clearer vision of what genuine engagement and dedication look like. By the novel's end, he determines that instead of worrying about his own problems, he will help others cope with theirs. He will leave the playboy life he has known, get married, and go to medical school.

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