

The song goes on

Robert Atnip, MD

The author (ΑΩΑ, University of Alabama, 1976) is a member of the board of directors of Alpha Omega Alpha.

I am an academic vascular surgeon, a senior faculty member at a University Hospital, a mentor of medical students and residents, and a teacher of professionalism. My own lessons in professionalism came while in medical school, but not in any classroom or book. I don't recall the word even being spoken during those four years (1974–78). No doubt some of those who modeled it for me were physicians, but in retrospect, the most influential person was no doctor, but a musician.

That music has the power to pervade the human experience may be a mystery, but it is no secret. Music is as universal as the human senses, and as vital. As a form of human expression, music is at the same time both elemental and transcendent. It is one of humanity's finest gifts to itself, a gift that to our lament cannot be as readily celebrated in *The Pharos* as the visual and literary arts. Music is not for speaking or writing. Music is ineffable emotion, a sequence of nameless swells and surges that defy the bounds of speech. Our voices are put to much better use making music than describing it and, in like manner, professionalism is much less a creed to be discerned and codified than it is a craft to be realized and enacted. Therein lies the basis for choral music to instruct me in the finer points of professionalism.

Nowadays, professionalism is a paramount concern to the health care world, but it was not always so. "Professionalism" was irrelevant to academia prior to 1965. My search for "professionalism" as a key word in OLD_OVID (1947–65) returned only the red-lettered retort, "Unable to match with any subject heading." In the fifteen years that followed, "professionalism" made its debut with 180 appearances, the majority in nursing journals or, oddly enough, in the dentistry literature. But only in the last thirty years has "professionalism" gained enough traction to merit the eight subject headings to which it now maps in OVID, the thousands of publications devoted to probing its obliquities, or the several awards and grants now bestowed in its name by prestigious societies such as ours.

This logarithmic progression is extraordinary for a concept that acquired its name as long ago as the fourteenth century. Toward the end of the so-called Dark Ages, the word "profess" appeared among religious orders with the meaning "to take a vow," or "to declare [a belief] publicly." This definition and related word forms served adequately, perhaps even admirably, throughout all subsequent ages of history and into modern times. Only in the post-Modern era has the simplicity and sparse eloquence of these phrases come to be viewed as inadequate for today's professionals. But I think what may be lacking is not the words, but the . . . music!

And so in the mid-1970s, modern professionalism's "early years," I came upon my unwitting mentor-to-be while in medical school in Birmingham, Alabama. Having enjoyed music



and singing as a youth, and wanting some activity beyond the confines of studying anatomy and physiology, I met JWS, the organist and choirmaster at a local church. The meeting was happenstance, but serendipity has never worked any better magic than this. I joined and sang in his choir, as much an amateur singer as I was a fledgling doctor. But the experience was profound, a turning point for me, and a revelation of new worlds. For the next three years this choir became as important to me as my medical education. Under the direction of JWS, or more properly, under his spell, I learned what it is to

"profess" choral music: to blend many voices into one sound, the music built on every voice, but ever greater than any one alone; to tune each voice and phrase toward perfection; to purify many harmonies into one great and coherent beauty. The sounds and the music were exquisite, many of them recorded at that time, and still inspiring to me more than thirty years later. To listen to them is to understand the fruits of professionalism and, moreover, to discern therein a startling similarity to what we seek to do in the individual and corporate acts of medical practice.

This connection of music to medicine may seem obscure to some, and self-evident to others. But I contend that the truths learned in the making of music are the same truths that we who profess medicine must teach our students, and re-affirm for ourselves: competence, discipline, determination, focus, artistry, the seeking of common goals, the drive to excel, the ability to lead and to follow, and one perhaps not as obvious: aesthetics—the presence of beauty and inner harmony in what we do. I do not equate humanism with professionalism, but they have much in common. They are separate yet inseparable, linked by a common need for each to nourish the other. I was most fortunate at a remarkable and formative time of my life to be in a milieu suffused with an abundance of each. To those who cleared this path for me, I owe an inexpressible debt. They knew that professionalism has not only a body, but a soul.

It was never my destiny to become a professional musician, but I am delighted to be a musical professional. Music may not have made me a better medical scientist, but it has made me a better physician. *Vita brevis, ars longa*. To the extent that we are true to our identity as healers, then we must—in concert with advances in science and technology—remain centered on the collective humanity of patient and physician, which in all its forms is our common bond.

JWS retired in 1998, and died in 2007 of Parkinson's disease. He and Ted Harris were much alike. They were extraordinary persons who led others to perform beyond expectations, and showed all those around them that exceptional effort yields uncommon rewards. These two men were called into different professions, but each understood precisely what it meant to "take a vow" and to "declare publicly." It is to the betterment of humankind that each lived, and thus our own joyful duty to ensure that their song goes on.