Classical quotes for critical care

ROBERT F. WILSON, MD

Members of the Society of Critical Care Medicine and Friends:

I would like to thank all of you for the tremendous honor that you have bestowed upon me for this past year. I'd like to particularly thank Norma Shoemaker, our Executive Director, for her tremendous help and guidance. I don't think that many of you can adequately appreciate how hard she works running the Society, keeping track of almost 3,000 members, and monitoring all of the various details associated with the annual meeting.

Particular thanks also to the Editor for not only helping me to be one of the founders of the Society back in 1970, but also for the tremendous amount of time, blood, and sweat that he has contributed to our outstanding journal.

I am also especially thankful to Bart Chernow for his program innovations and very hard work with this year's meeting. It's great to be a part of such an outstanding success.

I must also thank all the members of our Council. They have put up with a great deal from me. Although they grumbled a bit, by working through dinner and late into the night on several occasions, the Council accomplished a great deal. I feel that they have prepared for next year exceptionally well. I think that we are starting Dennis Greenbaum's presidency off with a bang. We are expecting great things from him.

I must also give a very special thanks to my dear wife. She has put up with an unbelievable amount of hassle, particularly during this past year. I wasn't home very much and when I was home, I tended to be tired and grumpy. I really don't know how she puts up with it all, but I appreciate her more than she will ever know.

For some time I was thinking about what I could give as a presidential address to this group. I carefully considered a number of scientific and weighty political topics. However, I somehow didn't really feel comfortable with them. Finally, I decided that since the Society has a very special spot in my heart, perhaps I could share a few of my thoughts concerning life and critical care with you. These thoughts will be presented in the form of many of the quotations that I have enjoyed and loved over the years.

I'm convinced that no one working in critical care can be truly successful and happy unless he has a very special concern for the welfare of his patients. I think that St. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians captured the type of love we should have when he wrote:

Though I speak with the tongues of men
and of angels, and have not love,
I am becoming as sounding brass,
or a tinkling cymbal

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor,
and though I give my body to be burned,
and have not love, I am nothing.

Love suffereth long, and is kind. Love envieth not,
Love vaunteth not itself and is not puffed up

Love beareth all things, believeth all things,
Hopeth all things, endureth all things,
Love never faileth.

Corinthians 13:1–8

Every patient is important, and every encounter with that patient and his family is important. Things that we may sometimes consider trivial, and thus overlook, especially in view of the complexity of multiple medical problems, may have tremendous significance. As John Donne said:

No man is an island, entire of itself
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea. Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were.
Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind,
and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions #17
John Donne

Very few people work harder than ICU personnel, but not infrequently it doesn't really seem to change things.

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher,
vanity of vanities; all is vanity.
What profit hath a man of all his labor
which he taketh under the sun?
One generation passeth away,  
and another generation cometh;  
but the earth abideth forever  
The sun also ariseth.

Ecclesiastes 1:2-5

All our skill, wisdom, and efforts may seem to be of  
no avail, not only with patient care, but also academically.

I returned, and saw under the sun,  
that the race is not to the swift,  
nor the battle to the strong,  
neither yet bread to the wise,  
nor yet riches to men of understanding,  
nor yet favor to men of skill;  
but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12

It's interesting that the great sports writer, Grantland  
Rice, also quoted this passage; however, he added: "But  
that's the way to bet."

Sometimes we might like to remake the world.

Ah Love! could you and I with Him conspire  
to grasp this Sorry Scheme of Things entire  
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then  
Remold it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

The Rubaiyat of Omar  
Khayyám, Stanza 99  
Edward FitzGerald

Often there seems to be nothing we can do about  
what is happening around us.

The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,  
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line.  
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

The Rubaiyat of Omar  
Khayyám, Stanza 71  
Edward FitzGerald

Sometimes even your best efforts aren't recognized  
or appreciated. The journal may have dared to turn  
down your last paper.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
The dark, unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Elegy Written in a Country  
Churchyard  
Thomas Gray

Sometimes it's surprising how rapidly some of the  
younger men rise academically, and one might wonder,  
as did Cassius of Julius Caesar:

Upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed  
that he hath grown so great.

Julius Caesar; Act I, Scene II  
William Shakespeare

On the other hand, most achievements come as a  
result of very hard work:

The heights by great men reached and kept  
were not attained by sudden flight  
But they, while their companions slept,  
Were toiling upward in the night.

The Ladder of St. Augustine,  
Stanza 10  
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

For an ICU to function optimally, everyone on the  
team has to do his job well—no matter how menial or  
small it is:

We can't all be captains, we've got to be crew,  
There's something for all of us here,  
There's big work to do, and there's lesser to do,  
And the task you must do is the near.

If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill  
Be a scrub in the valley—but be  
The best little scrub by the side of the rill;  
Be a bush if you can't be a tree.

If you can't be a highway then just be a trail,  
If you can't be the sun be a star;  
It isn't by size that you win or you fail—  
Be the best of whatever you are!

Be the Best of Whatever You are  
Douglas Malloch

—And, once a task is begun, finish it, or as one  
unknown poet wrote:

If a Task is once begun,  
Never leave it till it's done.  
Be the labor great or small,  
Do it well or not at all.

Unknown

As we work, we will always meet obstacles. But we  
must keep trying despite multiple impediments.

If you strike a thorn on a rose,  
Keep a-goin'!  
If it hails or if it snows,  
Keep a-goin'!  
'Taint no use to sit an' whine  
When the fish ain't on your line;  
Bait your hook an' keep a-tryin'—  
Keep a-goin'!

Keep a-Goin'  
Frank L. Stanton

We must always try to do our best, even if it is only  
for our own conscience.

There is no witness so dreadful, no accuser  
so terrible as the conscience that dwells in  
the heart of every man.

History, Book XVIII, Sec 43  
Polybius (208–126 BC)
Or as in Polonius’s advice to Laertes

This above all, to thine own self be true
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

*Hamlet*: Act I, Scene III
William Shakespeare

Churchill also noted

History with its flickering lamp stumbles
along the trail of the past, trying to
reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes,
and kindle with pale gleams the passion of
former days.

What is the worth of all this? The only
guide to a man is his conscience; the only
shield to his memory is the rectitude and
sincerity of his actions.

It is very imprudent to walk through life
without this shield, because we are so
often mocked by the failure of our hopes
and the upsetting of our calculations;
but with this shield, however the fates may play,
we march always in the ranks of honor.

Tribute to Neville
Chamberlain,
House of Commons,
November 12, 1940
Sir Winston Spencer Churchill

We must also recognize that we can never stop trying
to learn. Acquiring medical knowledge is like rowing
upstream against a strong current. You have to work
very hard to make any headway at all, but if you slacken
at all in your efforts, you’re rapidly swept downstream.
I recall that I never felt as confident about my medical
knowledge as I did as a third-year medical student.

A little learning is a dangerous thing
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.

or

Be not the first by whom the new are tried
Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.

*An Essay on Criticism*
Alexander Pope

In reading late at night, one might have experiences
similar to those of Poe:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak
and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a
tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door:
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door:
Only this, and nothing more."

*The Raven*
Edgar Allen Poe

I’m sure some of my students and residents would
like to forget some of the quaint and curious volumes
I’ve written.

Not only must our knowledge grow, but also our souls.

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life’s unresting sea!

*The Chambered Nautilus*
Oliver Wendell Holmes

We also need perspective and insight:

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see ourselves as ither see us!
It wad frae mony a blander free us,
An’ foolish notion:
What airs in dress an’ gait wad lea’e us,
An’e’n devotion!

*To a Louse on Seeing One on a Lady’s Bonnet at Church*
Robert Burns

Eventually, no matter how much we work, we need
to go to a very special place we call home.

It takes a heap o’ livin’ in a house t’ make it home,
A heap o’ sun an’ shadder, an’ ye sometimes have t’ roam
Afore ye really ‘preciate the things ye left behind
An’ hunger fer ‘em somehow, with ‘em allus on yer mind.
It don’t make any difference how rich ye get t’ be
How much yer chairs an’ tables cost, how great yer
luxury:
It ain’t home t’ ye, though it be the palace of a king,
Until somehow yer soul is sort o’ wrapped ’round everyth-
ing.

*Home*
Edgar A. Guest

Increasingly, members of our Society travel out of
the country to give lectures, and it’s interesting how
much traveling abroad gets one to appreciate his homel-
land.

Breathes there the man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said:
"This is my own, my native land"?
Whose heart hath ne’er within him burned
As home his footsteps he hath turned,
From wandering on a foreign strand?

*Love of Country*
From “The Lay of the Last Minstrel”
Sir Walter Scott

At home, at the end of the day, we may finally be
able to relax with some peace and quiet.
The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.
Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

_Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard_
Thomas Gray

Longfellow also captured a sense of that relaxation
that might come at the end of the day.

The day is done, and the darkness
Falls from the wings of Night,
As a feather is wafted downward
From an eagle in his flight.
And the night shall be filled with music
And the cares that infest the day,
Shall fold their tents like the Arabs
And as silently steal away.

_The Day Is Done_
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

As we try to relax, it may be helpful to close our eyes
and think of some pleasant thoughts or scenes.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

_The Daffodils_
William Wordsworth

Contemplating a work of art may be helpful.

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing

_Endymion_
John Keats

And another picture one might consider for our
mind’s eye:

And still of a winter’s night, they say, when the
wind is in the trees,
When the moon is a ghostly galley tossed upon
cloudy seas,
When the road is a ribbon of moonlight over the
purple moor,

A highwayman comes riding,
Riding, riding,
A highwayman comes riding up to the old inn-door

_The Highwayman_
Alfred Noyes

We also all need someone to love. Perhaps one of the
most touching and famous quotations on love was
written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of every day’s
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as men turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

_Sonnets from the Portuguese, No. 1_
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Or:

She was a phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely apparition, sent
To be a moment’s ornament;
Her eyes as stars of twilight fair;
Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;
A perfect woman, nobly planned
To warm, to comfort, and command;
And yet a spirit still, and bright
With something of angelic light

_She was a Phantom of Delight_
William Wordsworth

My wife, Jackie, commented that the last verse of
this quotation really describes the perfect ICU nurse.
You should enjoy your children while they’re small.
They grow up too quickly, and it’s very easy to be too
busy to spend enough time with them.

Blessings on thee, little man,
Barefoot boy, with cheek of tan!
With thy turned-up pantaloons,
And thy merry whistled tunes;
With thy red lip, redder still.
Every morn shall lead thee through
Fresh baptisms of the dew;
Every evening from thy feet
Shall the cool wind kiss the heat;
All too soon these feet must hide
In the prison cells of pride,
 Lose the freedom of the sod,
Like a colt's for work be shod
Made to tread the mills of toil
Happy if their track be found
Never on forbidden ground:
Happy if they sink not in
Quick and treacherous sands of sin,
Ah! that thou couldst know thy joy,
Ere it passes, barefoot boy!

_The Barefoot Boy_
John Greenleaf Whittier

No matter how hard we try, some of our patients will die. Our attitudes about death are important and may be difficult to hide from our patients and their families. Sometimes life seems very empty.

Of that this too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew;
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His cannon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world.

_Hamlet_, Act I, Scene II
Shakespeare

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time:
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

_Macbeth_, Act V, Scene V
Shakespeare

Tennyson presents a better attitude toward death:

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me,
And may there be no moaning of the bar
When I put out to sea.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark:

For tho' from out our bourne of time and place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

_Crossing the Bar_
Alfred Tennyson

Bryant also tells us how to approach death calmly:

So live that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan that moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death.

Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unaltering trust, approach thy grave

Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

_Thanatopsis_
William Cullen Bryant

And death may be a new beginning—perhaps for some new but joyous work.

When earth’s last picture is painted, and the tubes are twisted and dried,
When the oldest colors have faded, and the youngest critic has died,
We shall rest, and, faith, we shall need it—lie down for an eon or two,
Till the Master of All Good Workmen shall set us to work anew!
And only the Master shall praise us, and only the Master shall blame;
And no one shall work for money, and no one shall work for fame;
But each for the joy of the working, and each, in his separate star,
Shall draw the Thing as he sees It for the God of Things as They Are!

_L'Envoi_
Rudyard Kipling

Stevenson even wrote his own epitaph:

Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie:
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he long’d to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

_Requiem_
Robert Louis Stevenson

If possible, don’t let a vibrant soul just gradually waste away in an ICU when there is no chance of restoring the patient to a meaningful life. Some years ago the frigate “Constitution,” which was nicknamed “Old Ironsides” and had won so many great naval victories in the war of 1812, was going to be allowed to rot away at her moorings. Oliver Wendell Holmes, as a student, was incensed about this and wrote the following:

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
That banner in the sky;
Beneath it rung the battle-shout
And burst the cannon’s roar:
The meteor of the ocean air
Shall sweep the clouds no more!

Her deck, once red with hero’s blood,
Where knelt the vanquished foe,
When winds were hurry’g o’er the flood
And waves were white below
No more shall feel the victor's tread,
Or know the conquered knee:
The harpies of the shore shall pluck
The eagle of the sea!
O better that her shattered hulk
Should sink beneath the wave!
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
And there should be her grave:
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms.
The lightning and the gale!

*Old Ironsides*
Oliver Wendell Holmes

We should take a positive attitude about life as Wadsworth did:

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main.
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother.
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us then be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing.
Learn to labor and to wait.

*A Psalm of Life*
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

But when shall we be stronger?
Will it be the next week, or the next year?
Our brethren are already in the field!
Why stand we here idle?
What is it that Gentlemen wish? What would they have?
Is life so dear, or peace so sweet,
as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?
Forbid it, Almighty God!
I know not what course others may take;
but as for me, give me Liberty or give me death!

*The War Inevitable*
March, 1775
Patrick Henry

Churchill provided much of the inspiration for England in its darkest days during World War II. One of his quotations typifies this spirit.

Never give in, never give in, never, never,
never, never—in nothing, great or small,
Large or petty—never give in except to
convictions of honor and good sense.

*Address at Harrow School*
October 29, 1941
Sir Winston Spencer Churchill

and, in perhaps one of his most famous quotations—

Let us ... brace ourselves to our duties,
and so bear ourselves that if the British
Empire and its Commonwealth last for a
thousand years, men will still say: "This
was their finest hour."

*Radio Broadcast*
July 14, 1940
Sir Winston Spencer Churchill

In closing, I leave you all with this thought.

We have lived and loved together
Through many changing years,
We have shared each other's gladness
And wept each other's tears.
And let us hope the future,
As the past has been will be:
I will share with thee my sorrows,
And thou thy joys with me.

Charles Jefferys

Thank you.