

ARTICLE · CULTURA & SAÚDE

The Intimate Enemy

A medical reflection on ingratitude as an amnesia that turns a benefactor into an enemy

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ABSTRACT

The author reflects on ingratitude drawing on medical experience and on the aphorisms of thinkers such as Seneca, Shakespeare, Condorcet and José de Alencar. He recalls the example of serenity set by Professor Bovero in the face of an ungrateful student, and the precept of being strict with oneself and benevolent toward one's neighbor. He argues that, despite all technical progress, man remains the same in his virtues and flaws, and that the physician, through his deep contact with pain, feels ingratitude in an especially painful way. He recounts a moving personal case: a child operated on as an emergency who offers him the medal won in a swimming championship. The text proposes a psychological mechanism for ingratitude, in which the beneficiary, unable to reciprocate, relieves his conflict of conscience by turning the benefactor into an enemy, in a kind of moral amnesia.

KEYWORDS: *ingratitude; medical ethics; doctor-patient relationship; human behavior; gratitude; aphorisms*

A small sum that one lends makes a debtor; a large sum, an enemy.

SENECA

On one occasion, Professor Renato Locchi bore an interesting testimony. He told how Bovero, upon being the victim of an act of ingratitude, without losing his composure, had remarked: "Man is just like that; it would be strange for him to behave any differently." His spiritual elevation was great. He heightened the contrast in behaviors: that of the ungrateful student and that of the indulgent master. It was thus that the essential meaning of Claparelli's recommendation became clear: "Be strict with oneself and benevolent toward one's neighbor." Here is a precept that demands great selflessness; it may even be placed alongside the Christian teaching that bids us offer the aggressor the other cheek.

Over the course of life, events accumulate. Some of greater gravity, others of lesser; in their essence, however, they are repetitive. They bring nothing new with regard to human behavior. Progress, the avalanche of knowledge, the modern resources of science and technology, the miracle of communication transform life but, deep down,

man does not change; he remains with the flaws and virtues proper to his nature. In truth, this refinement may occur in two different directions, accentuating, on the one hand, the good, the right, the true, and on the other, the bad, the evil, the false. One might say that virtues are refined and flaws are reinforced.

The physician, by the way of life that the profession affords, has, with respect to the human, a keener, deeper intuition, honed by his contact with pain and suffering.

The exercise of medical practice, leading to daily contact with the sick, grants the professional access to the innermost recesses of the soul at a depth that no other profession reaches.

In this contact, the emotional rewards are so many and of such magnitude that they make ingratitude seem all the more terrible, all the more painful; at times, strangely incomprehensible.

Fortunately, however, it is the positive experiences, of sincere recognition, that prevail, innumerable; they encompass rich and poor, adult and child, without boundaries of sex or race.

To underscore the difficulty the physician has in absorbing and accepting acts of ingratitude, I recount here a personal case, quite illustrative of the many emotional rewards and countless joys of practicing such a profession.

I once treated a patient who had undergone emergency surgery. It was a child who had been injured by a knife, fastened to his belt, while playing on his farm. The case was extremely serious and required restoration of the femoral artery at the root of the thigh. There was a risk to his life or of losing the limb, given the nature of the injury. Once everything was resolved, the child was discharged, with instructions to take up sports and to avoid accidents that might cause trauma or injury to that leg. During follow-up treatment, months later, the recommendation to swim was emphasized. The child broke into a very happy smile. He stood up, slipped his little hand into his pocket, took out a medal and offered it to me. He had won the prize in a swimming championship. Congratulating him, I gave the medal back to him. In an attitude of extreme happiness he said: "No, doctor! I won this medal for you." This medal, together with a Christmas card in which his parents expressed profound gratitude, is placed in a frame and kept, as a material symbol of a feeling: gratitude.

He is an example of the pure spontaneity of a child. For the patient it was the decoration of a victory; for the physician, a trophy of emotion.

For those who have grown accustomed to experiences like the one recounted, it becomes difficult to accept ingratitude, even though it can be perfectly understood. Indeed, in interpreting it, it is worth recalling Trebla, who delicately treated it as one of the best-known forms of amnesia.

According to J. Normand, the incidence of this sentiment in man concerns one of the most populated provinces of the soul.

José de Alencar, writing on the matter, refers to the ungrateful by comparing them to blowflies; just as these poison the body that nourishes them, the ungrateful often sell out the protectors who shelter them.

For Duclos, ingratitude has its origin in insensitivity, in pride or in self-interest; I would add there, as well, envy.

With perspicacity, Condorcet notes that ingratitude, daughter of self-interest and vanity, is the vice of petty souls. And Shakespeare, succinctly, defines ingratitude as a fury with a heart of marble.

Interesting, however, is that, in Masucci's Dictionary, right after the word ingratitude comes the word enemy and, in that entry, appears a sentence that inspired certain reflections. They may explain more intimately the mechanism that triggers this sentiment.

Seneca's sentence, presented as the epigraph, shows the crux of the matter. The more one does for someone who does not deserve it, the harder it will be for that person to reciprocate in a manner worthy of what was offered. In his material, physical or moral incompetence, the beneficiary comes to feel his own inferiority. His conscience impels him to make himself worthy of the benefits received. This fact generates inner conflict. There is a constant bombardment of his conscience. Two alternatives present themselves. The individual acknowledges the benefit and becomes grateful, or he adopts the opposite attitude. This decision breaks through the protection of his dignity. The easiest way to relieve the tension created by the drama of conscience over the position adopted is to regard his benefactor as an enemy. At that moment, the debts vanish for him, for he no longer acknowledges them; he even comes to forget them. It is Trebla's amnesia. And, in reality, the facts have only confirmed this analysis. Ingratitude is an acute ailment that becomes chronic. The ungrateful person does not become so little by little. He adopts a sudden, unexpected attitude of rebellion against his benefactor and, from then on, becomes a chronic enemy of his. Such people cause sadness, for they confirm the degradation of those who were intimate and dear.

There are, however, melancholy cases, of dear friends with hidden faces who sometimes end up adopting attitudes never expected. There are stories of very large debts, simply unpayable; these, when the spirits on both sides are not elevated, end up disuniting fraternal souls, destroying even a friendship of many years. In truth, who can safely sound the deep abysses of the human heart?

The level of education, the degree of culture or of cunning, may at times mask behavior for a certain time; but one cannot deceive many people for very long and, sooner or later, personal interests, vanity, or else the inability to recognize benevolence in the other, break through the barrier of dignity, and the soul opens, revealing its innermost self.

On this point, once again popular wisdom, in a maxim of extreme simplicity but forceful, captures the essence of the problem: "The day of the good deed is the eve of ingratitude."

In closing, I ask myself once more about man, that challenging enigma, never entirely explained: why should Bovero have been right and, with him, the voice of the people, both of them absolutely certain of the human reaction in the face of another's generosity? Would it be impossible for man to learn to accept the freely given gesture and, simply, to return it freely given, once again, rather than see in it a debt or a burden?