VIEWPOINTS

Musings on America's Birthday

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Why is it that when we talk about advocacy, we automatically assume we are talking about directly influencing a piece of federal or state legislation? A recent essay in *Harpers Magazine* entitled "The Great Amnesia" helped remind me of the importance of advocacy in the broadest sense: the improvement of society. While advocacy certainly includes direct lobbying, the expectations of such interaction; the nuances of influence; knowledge of the issue; and personal capability all too frequently squelch an individual's enthusiasm towards this essential yet basic American activity.

We must reawaken our personal role as advocates. The essay author notes, significant cultural changes occurred in the mid-1800s, not the least of which was the Civil War, which moved society away from the ideal espoused by faculty members at these small colleges in the far-flung parts of America. The "Great Amnesia" is that we have forgotten that our nation was founded on the principles laid out in the preamble to the Constitution: "to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility; provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." Forgetting America's founding principles creates amnesia to the simplicity of advocacy and the recognition of personal happiness through its undertaking.

These organizing principles were built on the philosophical assumption that we are innately moral and they are protected as rights, including those of association and speech. America's founders were willing to create an entire nation's infrastructure based on the assumption that man, given the opportunity, would act in accordance with his innate goodness. This assumption of the goodness of the individual leads to the improvement of society since man would be happy to be doing the right thing. The pursuit of happiness, also important enough to be protected as an unalienable right, is expressed through association and conversation. Personal reflection and discussion with others regarding the opportunity and challenge to act in a beneficent manner are important ways of

improving society and are also important components of contemporary pharmacy education. Without this assumption of the innate moral nature of man, we as a society, at worst, open ourselves to oppression and, at the least, overly paternalistic, even elitist approaches to social movement that negate the role of the individual in associated policy development.

The author discusses the role of independent, liberal arts colleges, established in the mid-1890s, in the American Midwest as attempts to "re-create American society by practicing as well as promoting standards of justice and freedom to which the nation had not risen." I would propose that faculty members at our nation's colleges and schools of pharmacy should recommit to awakening their students from this amnesia. You and your students are advocates not only for a piece of legislation but for the "standards of justice and freedom" that are guaranteed by our Constitution.

An individual's ability to pursue happiness is met through communicating his or her thoughts in a cogent manner so that these thoughts might lead to an improved society. Faculty at colleges and schools of pharmacy are important catalysts for reawakening students toward their personal pursuit of happiness. This reawakening must be reflected by their teachers, making it essential for you to be pursuing happiness as well. Our rights of association and speech easily find their utility and expression in the mission of higher education: teaching, research, and service. In my view, faculty members seem less comfortable in recognizing this connection between being good teachers and being good citizens. The outcomes regularly associated with a liberal arts education: critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, and effective communication are also established and appropriate outcomes of professional education. Considering the pharmacist as a scientist and researcher, the established educational outcomes of critical thinking and analysis serve both the profession and society in like manner. Today we increasingly depend on the use of science and research for evidence-based approaches to both policymaking and health care delivery. For the pharmacist, the ability to communicate effectively with and for patients increases the value of the profession to society.

The importance of advocacy as a responsibility and particularly American endeavor is frequently presented by faculty members in the context of student participation in professional associations. Associating with those of like mind is a satisfying experience. Associations allow those of like mind to present their thoughts and opinions for the benefit of the associates and hopefully for the benefit of society as a whole. Yet the risk of this shared ideology has the potential to lead to complacency of the associates, reactive and paternalistic behaviors, and in short, being out of touch with the needs of society. Important as associations are, the ability of the individual to critically assess the thoughts and opinions of his or her associates is even more important. Advocacy frequently finds its function in actions focused on the needs of a minority. The assessment of your associates reduces the potential for the majority to develop, implement, or maintain social contracts that are not cognizant of the minority or at least others that are not part of your association. It is important to be of value to society as an individual and as a pharmacist. Your value should be considered in the context of what society needs, not what you need from society.

The responsibility for sustaining the grand experiment that is the United States lies within each of us. The

essential take home message is the need for each of us to pursue our individual happiness through speech and association, the very essence of advocacy. The ability of individuals to engage in the improvement of society is dependent on the opportunities available to them to make the best use of their abilities. The improvement of personal abilities is a role of education, making faculty members a critical element in curing the amnesia of what we really mean when we talk about advocacy. Strengthening the abilities of students so that, as both individuals and pharmacists, they remain valuable to society through their pursuit of happiness is far greater than worrying about one piece of federal legislation. We do not need advocacy 101 classes; what we need are educators who model the concepts of a moral being, readily engage in influencing the direction of society through association, and use well-constructed arguments supported by facts to establish their opinions and analyze those of others. So let the amnesia be cleared. What greater happiness can the individual find than rebuffing the tyranny of the majority through thoughtful deliberation?

REFERENCES

1. Robinson M. A great amnesia. *Harpers Magazine*. May 2008; 17-21.