

Russell L. Cecil

October 13, 1881 — June 1, 1965

Dr. Russell L. Cecil, who was associated with the Cornell Medical College for nearly fifty years died June 1, 1965, at the age of 83. Dr. Cecil was Professor of Clinical Medicine in Cornell from 1933 to 1950 when he retired as Emeritus Clinical Professor and Consulting Physician in The New York Hospital.

One of the College's most distinguished faculty members, Dr. Cecil gained world-wide recognition for his creation of Cecil's *Textbook of Medicine*. On the occasion of his funeral¹, a successor in the editorship of his book, Dr. Walsh McDermott, delivered a eulogy, which with some modification is reproduced here.

I speak, as a sad and solemn tribute to a true friend of us all—not to say how much he was like other men, but to say in how very many ways he was different.

The influence for good or bad that each of us exerts in life, is usually enclosed by a fairly small circle and within it, we give pieces of ourselves to those around us.

Big pieces to those close to us in a personal sense, and smaller pieces of whatever size is needed, to those with whom we work.

And if we push that circle out too far, we run grave risk that all the pieces end up so minute that they are valueless to anyone.

But such was not the case with Russell Cecil.

Without skimping on the pieces for his family and his intimate associates, he nonetheless succeeded in giving real pieces to so very many more. "So very many more" were both those he knew and the literally hundreds of thousands he benefited, whom he never saw.

What his intimate associates felt of his influence shines through in the warm and always different anecdotes they constantly recite about him. Anecdotes of those days after World War I when he was the central figure of that small group of young doctors, all destined for great distinction, who lived together in a bachelor menage on sixty-second street.

But this wonderful capacity of one human being to support and to delight another, which Russ Cecil owned in such large measure, was not something only of his youth; he kept it at a high pitch his whole life.

And he had it even in those small affairs of daily life which most of us treat as almost mechanical transactions.

Whenever he would call me on the telephone, he would call out my given name, with that explosive rising inflection of his, and make me feel, in the fraction of a second, that a whole new world of exciting adventures was just about to open up before me.

The message itself might be of the most mundane sort, but it was that way he had, of throwing that first lifeline to the other human being, that would glow after in one's heart.

¹ In the Madison Presbyterian Church, June 4

And with this extraordinary ability to throw the lifeline to the other person went an equally extraordinary perceptivity of other persons. In the professional sphere, in my whole experience, Russ Cecil was absolutely without equal in his ability to judge the worth of other men. He saw his fellow physicians with very clear eyes. Yet without altering the picture as he saw it, he would always surround his Judgments with a frame of compassion and a certain amused tolerance of human frailty.

Indeed, the faintly comical antics of most human beings, including himself, were a source of constant delight to him, and he loved to describe them with that salty humor we knew so well.

This urbane and witty man we knew as a cosmopolitan, was the product of the post-bellum South, yet he always refused to be a traditionalist.

He was a modern man when he graduated from Princeton more than sixty years ago, and he stayed modern all the way.

But every now and then he would reveal “the persistence of the past,” in some of the old-fashioned values he cherished.

In book publishing, whenever a new edition of a work is brought out, it is necessary to destroy—quite literally to chop up—the remaining copies of the old one.

Whenever Russ would think of this happening to his book, he would be filled all over again with a sense of outrage.

Not outrage because it was his book but outrage that any book could be subjected to such vandalism. For deep within him was that old attitude derived from our frontier days, that a book—any book—as a product of man’s intellectual creativity was something very precious and not a thing to be destroyed by any man or group of men.

And it was in that same spirit of respect for creativity that he made himself a Greek classicist, a poet, and an artist.

In his scientific and professional life had been limited to his accomplishments in the laboratory and at the bedside, he would have had a most distinguished career, but, as we all know, it turned out to be something far more than that.

For, forty years ago he had an original idea that without question made him the best known American physician in the world—and known for something of the intellect.

He reasoned that if the expertise of our country’s finest physicians could be properly fused into one book, an instrument would be created that could be put into the hands of physicians everywhere to help them in their task.

He made a success of this idea—a success far greater than he had dreamed.

Today his book, and the later ones like it, have been institutionalized and hence no longer represent that personalized form of creativity that was his.

But forty years ago it was an act of personal creativity, to identify who could do things best, to get them to do it, and to fuse the pieces into the whole.

And his uncanny ability to note the strengths in others, stood him in very good stead in this work.

This act of creativity had an immense effect in helping to turn medical students into better physicians, and they are deeply grateful, as can be seen by the whole flood of letters to Mrs. Cecil from physicians young and old on the announcement of his death.

But his creativity had an even wider impact, for all over the world in innumerable single crucial incidents, what he did enabled some physicians to be guided to the correct action for the benefit of a sick patient.

Thus forty years ago, Russell Cecil forged one of the most important of our instruments whereby we could follow that sacred principle of our Judaeo-Christian culture—that the creativity of all men should be used for the individual—for the good of the one man who needs it. . . .

These are some of the ways in which Russ Cecil was different and in their many facets, they tell us the meaning of the man.

He gave the delight of loving to those he knew, and he helped to give the chance to continue to live to the many he never knew.

We mourn his death today; we feel a great loss.

But even today in the midst of our sadness and our loss, we also know that having had our own lives influenced by Russell Cecil is an immense and an enduring gain.

As one of his old friends put it in a message to Mrs. Cecil: “What a triumphant life!”

Walsh McDermott