

## Food for Thought—Ambroise Paré and Walking the Walk



Some of the greatest lessons are the ones we learn by watching how people behave, how they live their lives. Jesus was radical in placing value on humility and service rather than on fame, wealth, reputation, or power. Many people profess to believe in his value system, but not so many live it. This is the story of one man who did. His name was Ambroise Paré (Pa-RAY), and he was born in France in 1510. Paré's family was not wealthy and could only afford a merchant-class education for their son, so he did not learn Latin or Greek, but his family did teach him something more important—the love of God, and it shaped what he did with his entire life.

In those days in Europe, professors at medical schools almost never performed surgery because they believed it was shameful to dirty one's hands—that was the sort of thing servants did, they thought. Barbers, not doctors, were the ones who pulled teeth, treated wounds etc., in addition to shaving and trimming hair. Barbers who were especially skilled at the medical/wound part of their work were called barber-surgeons. Paré grew up to be a barber's assistant and became more and more interested in the medical side of the work. He wanted to become a doctor, so he moved to Paris where the best medical schools were. He discovered, however, that regardless of how good his medical knowledge was, he could not, sadly and ironically, go to medical school because the entrance exams had to be taken in Latin or Greek.

It is important to note here what Paré didn't do. He did not waste his energy in becoming morose or bitter, and he did not give up on his hopes of serving the sick and injured. Instead of giving up, he did the next right thing. There was a charity hospital in Paris at the time, and Paré went to work there as a barber-surgeon. The hospital was primitive, cold, and smelly, but Paré learned a great deal there from first-hand experience. This may not have looked like success in the world's eyes, but what Paré learned through his time there was actually more accurate than what was being taught in the medical schools at the time.

When France went to war, Paré went with the army as a surgeon, and what he learned through this experience there would lead to a new era in medicine. Doctors at the time believed that gunpowder burns would become fatal unless they were treated in a certain way. What was this supposedly best treatment? Pouring boiling oil onto the burn/wound! After one battle, Paré ran out of boiling oil and desperately tried to think what he could do for the remaining gunpowder burn patients. He made a salve (egg, rose oil, and turpentine) and dressed the remaining wounds with it. All night he worried about the men for whom he'd had no boiling oil. But when he went to check on his patients in the morning, he discovered that the men who had been treated with the standard method of boiling oil were in great pain, they were feverish, and their wounds were inflamed. The men who'd been treated with his makeshift salve had not died and were actually faring much better than the others and suffering far less pain. Paré was stunned and promptly resolved never to use burning oil again.

Paré began to wonder if there were other ways of lessening the pain of his patients. Amputations were often necessary, especially in war, and not only were they incredibly painful, but as soon as a limb had been severed, something had to be done to prevent the patient from bleeding to death. The standard solution was to cauterize or sear the stump of a leg or arm with a white-hot iron. The soldiers, however, often died from the shock of this extreme cauterization treatment. Paré began to wonder if there were some less painful way of managing the problem, and one day he had an idea. The next time a soldier with a shattered leg was brought in for an amputation, Paré made the cut but instead of using the hot iron to cauterize the limb, simply tied the blood vessels off with a silk thread. And it worked!

Even though Paré's new methods saved the lives of thousands of soldiers, he began to be criticized by--guess who?—doctors. We'd think doctors would be glad to learn of improved ways to treat patients, methods less painful and with greater chances of survival. But most doctors weren't glad. They didn't want it to look like their methods had been hurting people or had been in any way incorrect. They cared about their reputations more than about suffering patients.

It is interesting to again note that Paré's response to this opposition and what he did not do. He did not waste his time arguing with the doctors or medical schools, trying to force them to admit their folly, nor did he despair in the face of societal injustice and the sorry state of human nature. Instead, he did the next right thing. What was the next right thing? To help as many people as he could. So he wrote a book about the many things he had learned through experience, and he wrote it in French so that other humble barber-surgeons could read it. The book's language was simple and easy to understand. It was not written to impress people with its scholarliness but was instead full of practical advice. He even included illustrations showing the design of artificial limbs and other useful medical devices.

The angry doctors fought to prevent the publication of his book, and they succeeded in delaying it for four years, but finally the book was published. It sold out quickly and was reprinted many times and translated into other language as well. Paré would in time be called The Father of Modern Surgery.

When Paré published his book, some people wondered why he shared his findings so freely. If he had kept his discoveries to himself, Paré could've made a good deal of money because he'd be the only person who knew how to perform his treatments. But money and power were never among Paré's goals. His compassion and humility framed his decisions and marked him as a true Christian. It is interesting to note that the doctors and medical professors who fought against Paré almost certainly considered themselves to be good Christian men too. But they were deceived and blind to their pride and self-interest. (Most of us are blind to our self-interest—or at least near sighted.)

Paré, despite never having been allowed to earn a medical degree, became France's best surgeon. The king eventually made him his surgeon as well. As time passed, Paré became known for a quotation which first appears in his personal notes (about the care of a certain patient) and which is characteristic of his heart: "*Je le pansai, Dieu le guerit*" ("I bound his wounds, God healed him.") Full of compassion and caring far more about his patients than his pride, Paré walked out the values of the beatitudes, and his life accordingly bore extraordinarily good fruit.

You can read about Paré in more detail in John Hudson Tiner's book *Exploring the History of Medicine*. Paré's story is also contained in Tiner's *When Science Fails*. There is an entire series of *Exploring the World of...* books, and they are wonderful. If you discover they're written for school kids, don't let your pride as an "adult" keep you from reading them. You'll find much you never knew and much that enriches what you did know.

Portrait of Paré courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.