

## Mortal Lessons – An Excerpt

By Richard Selzer, M.D.

"On the bulletin board in the front hall of the hospital where I work," Dr. Selzer begins, "there appeared an announcement. 'Yeshi Dhonden,' it read, 'will make rounds at six o'clock on the morning of June 10... Yeshi Dhonden is Personal Physician to the Dalai Lama.' I am not so leathery a skeptic that I would knowingly ignore an emissary from the gods. Not only might such sangfroid be inimical to one's earthly well-being, it could take care of eternity, as well. "Thus, on the morning of June 10, I join the clutch of whitecoats waiting ... for ... rounds. The air in the room is heavy with ill-concealed dubiety and suspicion of bamboozlement.

At precisely six o'clock, he materializes, a short, golden, ... man, dressed in a sleeveless robe of saffron and maroon.... "He bows in greeting while his young interpreter makes the introduction. Yeshi Dhonden, we are told, will examine a patient ... [whose] diagnosis is unknown to [him,] as it is to us.... We are further informed that, for the past two hours, Yeshi Dhonden has purified himself by fasting, bathing, and prayer. I, having breakfasted well, performed only the most desultory of ablutions, and given no thought at all to my soul, glance furtively at my fellows. Suddenly, we seem a soiled, uncouth lot.

"The patient had been awakened early and told that she ... [will] be examined by a foreign doctor, ... so when we enter her room, [she] shows no surprise.... Yeshi Dhonden steps to the bedside while the rest stand apart, watching. For a long time, he gazes at the woman, favoring no part of her body with his eyes, but seeming to fix his glance at a place just above her supine form. I, too, study her. No physical sign or obvious symptom gives a clue to the nature of her disease.

"At last, he takes her hand, raising it in both of his own. Now he bends over the bed in a kind of crouching stance, his head drawn down into the collar of his robe. His eyes are closed as he feels for her pulse. In a moment he has found the spot, and for the next half-hour he remains thus, suspended like some exotic golden bird with folded wings, holding the pulse of the woman beneath his fingers, cradling her hand in his.... It is palpation of the pulse raised to the state of ritual.... After a moment, the woman rests back upon her pillow. From time to time, she raises her head to look at the strange figure above her, then sinks back once more.

I cannot see their hands joined in a correspondence that is exclusive, intimate, his fingertips receiving the voice of her sick body through the rhythm and throb she offers at her wrist. "All at once, I am envious - not of him, not of Yeshi Dhonden for his gift of beauty and holiness, but of her. I want to be held like that, touched so, received. And I know that I, who have palpated a hundred thousand pulses, have felt not a single one. "At last, Yeshi Dhonden straightens, gently places the woman's hand upon the bed, and steps back.... [He] turns to leave. All this while, he has not uttered a single word.

"As he nears the door, the woman raises her head and calls out to him in a voice at once urgent and serene. 'Thank you, doctor,' she says, and touches with her other hand the place he had held on her wrist, as though to recapture something that had visited there. Yeshe Dhonden turns back for a moment to gaze at her, then steps into the corridor. Rounds are at an end. "We are seated ... in the conference room. Yeshe Dhonden speaks now for the first time, in soft Tibetan sounds that I have never heard before. He has barely begun when the young interpreter begins to translate, the two voices continuing in tandem - a bilingual fugue, the one chasing the other. It is like the chanting of monks. He speak of winds coursing through the body of the woman, currents that break against barriers, eddying. These vortices are in her blood, he says. The last spendings of an imperfect heart. Between the chambers of the heart, long, long before she was born, a wind had come and blown open a deep gate that must never be opened. Through it charge the full waters of her river, as the mountain stream cascades in the springtime, battering, knocking loose the land, and flooding her breath. Thus he speaks, and now is silent.

"May we ... have the diagnosis?' a professor asks." The host of ... [the] rounds answers. 'Congenital heart disease. Interventricular septal defect, with resultant heart failure.'" Dr. Richard Selzer concludes, "Now and then it happens, as I make my own rounds, that I hear the sounds of his voice, like an ancient Buddhist prayer, its meaning long since forgotten, only the music remaining. Then a jubilation possesses me, and I feel myself touched by something divine."

Selzer, R. (1974). *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*. New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster.