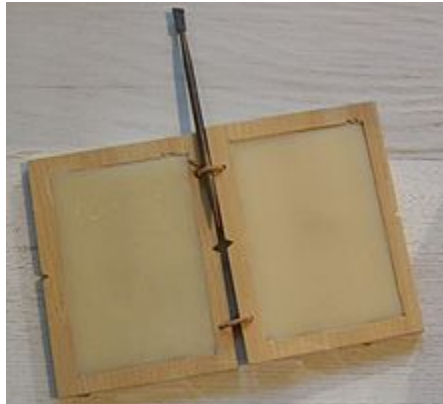


Matula Thoughts 3 January 2020

A new blank slate

2382 words



One.

Tabula Rasa 2020.

Optimists begin new years with clean slates. Most people negotiate internal tension between optimism and pessimism, but the sense of opportunity that comes with a new year generally tilts the balance toward optimism and the chance to start anew with mistakes and sins of the past perhaps forgotten, if not forgiven. The blank slate, though, is only a metaphor; each year ahead will build on stories of the past – history – and the contingencies of immediate moments. [Above: Blank wax tablet. *Wikipedia.*]

The new year, next decade, and century ahead for Michigan Urology, may be shaped by the century that unfurled after Hugh Cabot came to Ann Arbor late in 1919, but the critical determinants of the future will be the ingenuity, industry, and success of our educational programs, research, and clinical delivery. The idea that the *essential deliverable* of academic medicine is patient care, while not historically prominent, is absolutely clear today.

That *essential* deliverable, as we have said in our department of urology for some years, is *kind and excellent clinical care, thoroughly integrated with education and innovation*. With that, as the “North Star,” navigation becomes simple.

The Latin phrase *tabula rasa* originates from blank slates or waxed tablets that, after erasure of chalk or melting the wax, are available for fresh notation. Aristotle was one of the early thinkers who likened the mind to a clean writing slate and Avicenna, Thomas Aquinas, and John Locke, among many others, expanded the idea until modern neurobiology brought science to the matter. Metaphors are merely tools for thinking and communication, not absolute “true facts” that Don Coffey sought to recognize amidst the litter of contemporary information. Steven Pinker’s book of 2002, *Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, calls out the metaphor and explains that human behavior is not constructed on a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, but is heavily programmed. [See Pinker’s TED Talks 2008 and 2019.]



Blank Slate is also the clever name for an Ann Arbor Ice cream shop, the actual ice cream serving as a medium for an ingenious palate of flavors. Ice cream, one of the great inventions of humankind, is a delight in any season, although winter demand slackens enough for the Creamery to close up for the coldest months (above at Liberty and S. First Streets). Having borrowed the metaphor for this monthly message, I was duty bound to ask (and receive) permission from Michigan grad Janice Sigler who opened Blank Slate in July, 2014, with her husband.



Two.

January 1920 was an optimistic time for Hugh Cabot in Ann Arbor at a high point of his career. *Modern Urology*, his noteworthy 1918 textbook, capped his 15 year rise to central authority in the field. An early volunteer for the European conflict, well before American entry made it a world war, Cabot commanded a 2,500-bed general hospital on the Western Front by war's end. His return to Boston at the end of January 1919 was front-page news in the *Boston Herald*, although not without glitches. Cabot's team of doctors and nurses was blocked from leaving the train at the Boston station where a reception was waiting for them. A military authority ordered the ensemble to remain on the train and continue on the train to Camp Devon, Massachusetts and then New York City for official discharge of duties. After discussion Cabot declined the order and the entire medical team disembarked from the train to join the waiting reception and then dispersed into the crowd to resume civilian life. [Below: *Boston Herald*. Front page. "Harvard Surgical Unit held prisoners by error on arrival in Boston." January 31, 1919.]

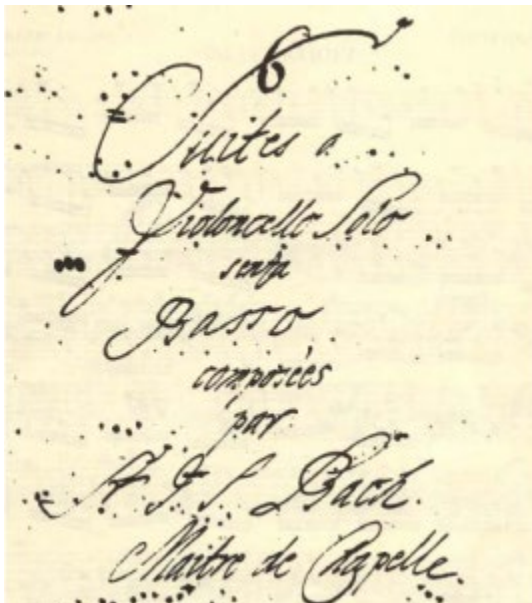


As Cabot resumed civilian life the world seemed enroute to a better future in terms of public health, geopolitics, economics, technology, and art. The devastating Great Influenza Epidemic was over, but other pandemics followed. Geopolitical solutions to WWI would pave the way to WWII and later conflicts. The economic world collapsed in less than a decade. Rapid advances of technology that seemed so wonderful in the early 20th century proved two-sided by century-end with antibiotic resistant bacteria threatening food safety, robots displacing jobs, computer malware holding businesses and cities hostage, identity theft via internet, and social media manipulation of public elections. The public eagerly embraces Orwellian Big Brother - reassuringly renamed *Alexa*, *Hey Google*, and *Siri* - with ubiquitous cameras on streets and in homes paving the way to authoritarian control of society through artificial intelligence.

Three.



The “blank slate” of the new year, brings to mind resolutions and the human itch for personal *mastery* of something - work, play, family, or hobby. Just as they were once inspired, Bach and Casals are posthumously inspiring future composers and musicians today. The cello suites have had a remarkable 300-year journey since Bach started writing them as exercises for his young wife in 1717. Casals discovered the largely-forgotten music in a shop in 1890 and mastered its performance by 1896 when he became principal cellist in Barcelona at the Gran Teatre del Liceu. [Below: Title page of Anna Magdalena Bach's manuscript: *Suites á Violoncello Solo Senza Basso*. Wikipedia.]



Casals had ups and downs, like everyone, but the worst immobilized him for two weeks in 1939 when he didn't leave his room in Paris, exhausted from recording the six Bach suites (Casals hated the recording process) and despairing over Franco's take-over of Spain. Casals was thoroughly burned out, although the favored terminology of the time described him as emotionally exhausted and depressed. Thankfully, he rebounded and his career reached new heights. Nearly 20 years later, at age 80, he married 20-year-old Marta Montañez y Martinez, dismissing concerns over their age discrepancy: “I look at it this way: if she dies, she dies!”

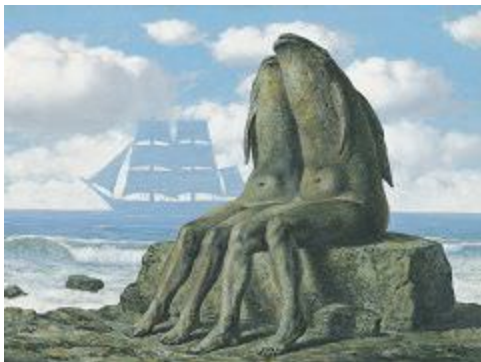
[Cesare Civetta. Mar 14, 2018. “Pablo Casals sacrificed his career to protest Franco.” <https://CesareCivetta.com/blog>] [Below: From *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Pablo Casals, 1965. Erich Auerbach, photograph, Hulton Archive/Getty Images.]



The inspiration of the suites lives on: Yo-Yo Ma was inspired by Bach’s cello suites at age 4 and today, at 64, travels six continents to perform all six suites in single sittings at 36 locations.

Combustion control has been a defining feature of our species beginning around campfires for comfort, cooking, and conversation. Heat may erase tabula rasas, but metaphoric *self-combustion* in modern society seems a new thing. It is not clear when burnout is a “legitimate” dysfunction or an extension of quotidian fatigue? That state of reduced personal efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization describes the condition today called *burnout*, that suddenly, it seems, has become epidemic in many professions, including health care. Conferences, surveys, and editorials proliferate and medicalize the matter. *The Lancet* offered a useful perspective in an editorial, *Physician burnout: the need to rehumanise health systems*. The wording is counterintuitive – the “rehumanization” of human health care. [*The Lancet*. 394: 1591, 2019.]

Four.



So how is it that health care became “dehumanized”– that very suggestion seems to be an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, as René Magritte cleverly depicted in his surreal paintings

such as the 1953 *Wonders of Nature* (©René Magritte). The dehumanization phenomenon in medicine seems linked to the systematization, corporatization, and commoditization of healthcare. *Systems* are necessary in modern healthcare, of course, but the displacement of what historically was called the doctor-patient relationship with checklists, guidelines, and clinical pathways distracts from the human element. The EHR-directed patient “encounters” have largely replaced the narratives of the human conditions wrapped-up in taking “the history.” *Corporate medicine* is quickly replacing small practices and bringing with it tainted ideas of business management, specifically the failed ideas of Taylorism, managerial accounting, and the North Star of shareholder value.

The idea of the limited liability corporation has largely built the modern world, as human society has given corporations many special rights such as limited liability, free speech, and some special benefits that ordinary people cannot have. (Back around 2003 Julian Wan gave me a book that explains this - *The Company – A Short History of a Revolutionary Idea*, by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge.) Undeclared but implicit in that Victorian innovation is a social contract that businesses exist not merely for shareholder value, but more broadly for stakeholder value – jobs, employees, benefits, suppliers, community – and for value to society-at-large, the most important stakeholder of all.

It is natural that some parts of health care are *legitimate commodities*, functioning optimally in a market-based economy without the necessity of an intermediary professional agent. Examples are many – flu shots, over-the counter medications, food supplements, and countless others. Other healthcare functions are complex, multilayered, and highly professional, such as renal transplantation, mental health treatment, and management of malignancy. In between these extremes are the essential transactions of visits to physicians, dental care, emergency department visits, orthopaedic care, periodic eye care, and treatment of urologic conditions – these are a mix of commodity and profession. The arbitrage of those two elements of society is an endless conversation.

The extension of personal mastery in one’s subject of choice, whether by New Year Resolution or not, is self-vaccination against burnout. The enhanced personal well-being can re-humanize your medical workplace in more ways than this essay can explain. Recently, up in Flint at the Hamilton Community Health Center, Mike Giacalone, Jr., the Chief Medical Officer, was explaining Hamilton to interviewing journalists and said that for the Flint patients, “every visit is not just a medical visit, but equally so a social, economic, and behavioral visit as well.” While particularly relevant in Flint, this should be a universal aspiration in health care. *The medical gaze* should try to “take it all in” and triage the needs of a patient and family as best possible, in spite of the rigidity of the EHR- constrained medical *encounter* programmed around a *chief complaint*.

Five.



Media and messages. Whether the medium is ice cream, canvas, blank paper, musical instrument, computer screen, stage, construction site, clinic room, operating room, or learner – artistry can be performed.

Everyone is a lifelong learner, but the health care field demands special attention. Undergraduates and beginning medical students are the most impressionable blank slates and for that reason the responsibility of role models, teachers, and mentors is perhaps the greatest for them among the learners we teach. For many of the younger set their first experiences seeing a physician, nurse, or physician's assistant at work (sometimes in instances of personal care of a UTI, stone, or surgical correction) imprints and fosters a lifelong pursuit. Whenever possible, these opportunities for shadowing or introductory teaching should be embraced. Residency training, however, is the most critical blank slate of all in medicine, fashioning the knowledge, skills, artistry, and professionalism for a career. [Images above & below from "the internet."]



Blank slates are opportunities, but risk erasure of the past although that is necessary with wax tablets and chalkboards. Parchment and paper were a big improvement allowing durable manuscripts and books, still at risk from fire (accidental or intentional) or other forms of destruction or deterioration. The new world of digital information carried the conceit that

humans could become “paperless”, but that is ultimately not only impractical but also a genuinely bad idea for free societies.

When governments, sectarian authorities, or corporatocracies control printing presses, airwaves, or other social media – society is captive to a few reigning opinions because inconvenient stories, opinions, ideas, or truths are conveniently avoided or erased. Clever memes and tweets easily subvert social groups and human ideals. One great feature of the human condition is the testing and synergism of opinions, ideas, and technologies that can build civilization for the greater good of mankind and sustainability of the planet. The central idea of free speech at the heart of civilization, is being sorely tested by the unexpected opportunities of modern technological social media.

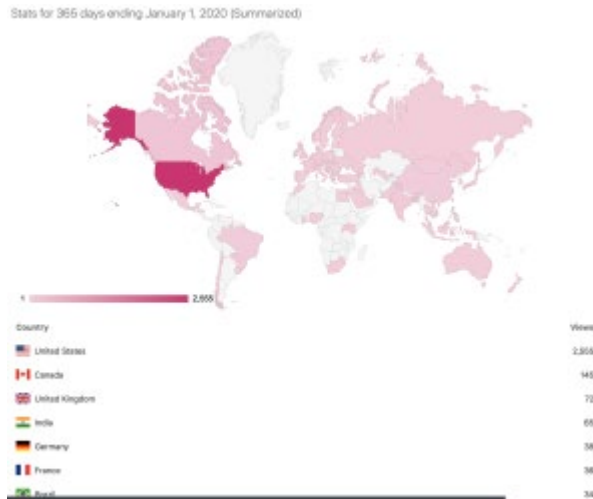
From our more parochial perspective in the art and business of health care, the erasure of history is an especially unfortunate reality, but we see it happen with each change of technology in our health records. The operative procedure notes and pathology reports from the earlier part of my career seem to have vanished with the paper records we utilized when I started here in Ann Arbor, as I have learned when trying to answer requests from people regarding, say, an exstrophy closure operative report in the 1940’s, a hospital course in the 1960’s, or thyroidectomy pathology findings from the 1970’s. Those floppy discs we had in the 1980’s and zip-drives of the 1990’s are increasingly difficult to access as obsolete technologies disappear. No one today can ensure that the massive data in electronic records will be converted to the media of the future – it seems unlikely that the “data cloud” of 2020 will be maintained in a future data cloud or its equivalent of 2050.



When Ed McGuire brought me to Ann Arbor in 1984 my blank slates were 3x5 index cards and the newly launched Macintosh Computer. Our hospital then had separate inpatient and outpatient paper charts. The Surgery Department administrators cautioned me to not get used to my Apple Computer as UM was preparing to launch the Wang Computer System. I didn’t listen – but still have the cards (one for with every patient I saw at Michigan) and that original Macintosh (now a book end).

Postscripts

Matula Thoughts analytics, 2019. We have no sense of the total readership of the monthly *What's New* delivered by email, but the web version *matulathoughts.org* has levelled off at 3357 views and 2199 visitors from 78 countries as of 31 December 2019, down from 3458 views, 2226 visitors from 89 countries in 2018, probably due to personal retreat from the chair position of the Urology Department at the University of Michigan. This past year we shortened the essay from 10 to 5 numbered items and dropped the word count to 2000 or so, although still far less convenient than a 140-character microblog tweet.



This leveling-off of *Matula Thoughts* recalls the *Hippocratic Aphorism*: Art is long, life is short, opportunity fleeting, experience hazardous, and judgment difficult. Other interpretations of the Ancient Greek vary the nuance and words, but clearly this personal essay, the first Friday of each month, is anachronistic and risky in offering personal judgments and observations. Those facts are more than balanced by the personal delight in hearing back from a handful of readers each month, thus extending these essays to dialogue and conversation, challenging facts, pointing out errors, and teaching me. Comments last month were especially appreciated. For all these, thank you.

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