

Living Life in Day-tight compartments; Osler's philosophy of daily living

It was in the early 1980s when I was an undergraduate student at the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, when I stumbled upon a dusty shelf on the ground floor of the library. In an obscure corner, covered with dust were books by Aristotle, Thomas Carlyle, Leo Tolstoy and William Osler and some others. Given that all students were focused on medical text books, it was clear that no one paid much attention to this corner. But I was fascinated by the books I found there. And among them were a book on the writings of Sir William Osler.



Till then I never heard of Dr William Osler. It turns out that he was a Canadian physician but practiced in the United States of America. He became one of the "Big Four"¹ founding professors of Johns Hopkins Hospital. Later he left for the United Kingdom where eventually he earned knighthood to become Sir William Osler.

You might be wondering why I am talking about Osler. I want to highlight his contribution to the science and the art of medicine for which the world owes its gratitude, and why he came to be known as the "Father of Modern Medicine."

He was a pioneer in two important aspects of medical training that now forms the core of medical education.

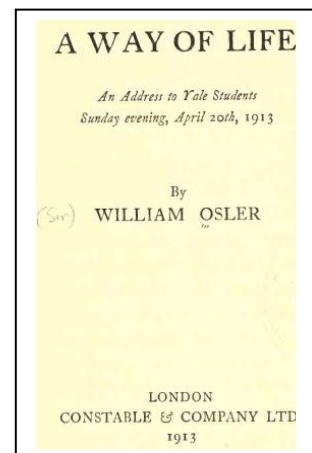
The first is that of training by the bedside of the patients for medical students. He pushed for medical students to study medicine at the bedside of their patients. His famous words on this matter are worthy to be etched in stone, "He who studies medicine without books sails an uncharted sea, but he who studies medicine without patients does not go to sea at all."

The second most important practice he introduced is that of residency training where the medical trainee lived and worked within the campus of the hospital. That is how our current residency training for post-graduate programmes is designed.

He was not only the "greatest diagnosticians ever to wield a stethoscope," but an avid reader and a prolific write too. The most important writing for the medical world is his "The Principles and Practice of Medicine," published in 1892. And it is the predecessor to our Harison's Textbook of Medicine as we know of it today.

This is just a fraction of his achievements but enough, let's not talk anymore of his personal achievement. What I want to talk about today is a talk he gave in Yale in April 1913 which was later published as "A Way of Life," by London Constable & Company Ltd.

His talk was expected to be either a religious or a moral one. Despite being a man of science, he was deeply religious too. Who knows some may have even expected a talk about medicine or diseases? But he did none of that; instead, he wandered into the practical life philosophies aimed at young men and women gathered there to listen to him. What



¹ The other three were William Welch, William Halstead & Howard Kelly

I am going to talk to you is “so simple indeed it is that some of you may turn away disappointed,” he said as he began his talk.

He began by saying “*Life is a habit,*” and habit is nothing but “a succession of actions that become more or less automatic. This great truth, which lies at the basis of all actions, muscular or psychic, is the key stone of the teaching of Aristotle, to whom the formation of habits was the basis of moral excellence,” he said.

He talked of “A Way of Life” which he explained thus, “Now the way of life that I preach is a habit to be acquired gradually by long and steady repetition. It is the practice of living for the day only, and for the day’s work, “Life in day-tight compartments.”

What did he mean by that?

First, the underlying characteristic of habit is discipline, that is being consistent and doing something repeatedly till it becomes part of your core and eventually, automatic to your nature. Those habits must of course focus on cultivating healthy habits and a balanced approach to daily life. Simple as it may sound, life without discipline cannot achieve much. That is the first take from him for the young doctors to think about.

And secondly, life in day-tight compartment meant “encouraging readers to embrace the present moment rather than being burdened by past regrets or future anxieties.”

More than in Osler’s time, today this bit of simple yet sagacious advice is much needed in our crowded world. From dawn to dusk and even beyond, we are plagued by constant worry. The pressures of work, relations, children, etc. keep us occupied constantly, our minds flitting from worry to worry, never for a moment striving to be still. And to quell that restlessness and to find satisfaction and meaning in our life is to focus on today. Yesterday is gone and no amount of worry will bring back a moment of that past; tomorrow is still unknown and one should know that worrying about it is futile. The Stoics have said this; Buddhism makes it the focus on the present as central to “mindful” living, and myriad Rinpoches and spiritual master propound the virtue of the present.

And yet we worry, we fret and we bind ourselves in knots over things past and things that are still in the future, losing what is at hand, i.e. the present moment. Dr Osler’s solution is simple; that is to make a habit of living one’s life in ‘compartments’ by separating the past and the future from the present. Think of a ship, he said, with watertight bulkheads. If you keep them shut, the boat floats. Open them all at once? It sinks. Our minds, he warned, are no different. He quotes Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish philosopher, to emphasize that “*Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand.*”

Therefore, our focus must remain squarely on today and by focusing on the tasks at hand and challenges facing us, rather than worry about what the future might bring. It is a practical way to deal with life in manageable proportions. It is a practical way to find meaning in everyday life, and a rational approach to navigate life by ‘focusing on the here and now.’ That is what Dr Osler meant by “Life in day-tight compartments.”

He encourages us to form positive habits and to embrace “aspects of physical well-being, mental clarity, and spiritual growth—all integral to achieving a fulfilling life.” This can happen only when your mind is uncluttered, only when your focus is on the matter at hand, and an acceptance that the past is gone, and future is yet to arrive. Therefore, what you have is the present and to grasp this with mental clarity and make it a habit to do so every day.

Practical steps to live in 'day-tight compartments, keep the following in mind and diligently practice till it becomes a force of habit for you.

Having said that, some of you might be thinking, "Does it mean I don't have to think or plan about the future?"

No, certainly not. You must keep focus on your future goals and you have to plan your life. But live one day at a time and as sung by Horace, you will find joy and satisfaction at the end of the day!

*Happy the man - and Happy he alone,
He who can call today his own,
He who secure within can say,
To-morrow, do thy worst for I have
lived today.*

I may suggest a few simple steps to living one day at a time.

- Start each day as a new day, uncluttered by yesterday's worries and disappointments. Think of the potential that today will bring. Set goals only for the day which are realistic and achievable. And at the end of the day, thank yourself for all that you have achieved TODAY
- Spend some time in the morning when you wake up to breathe in the joy of being alive. Don't read emails, messages or scroll your social media, and spend the morning in gentle exercise and reflection or in prayers
- During the day, at every moment remind yourself that "today is what I have been given and that I will make the best of it."
- And in the evening, spend some time reflecting on the day and be joyous of your achievements, and keep your worries, sorrows and disappointments outside the bedroom door when you go to sleep

So, ladies and gentlemen,

Having introduced the wisdom of Sir William Osler to you, in conclusion, let me leave behind a few of his aphorisms or gems of wisdom.

"The good physician treats the disease; the great physician treats the patient who has the disease," highlighting the importance of paying attention to the person who has the disease rather than the disease itself

"Listen to your patient—he is telling you the diagnosis", which emphasizes the importance of taking a good history

"It is much more important to know what sort of a patient has a disease than what sort of a disease a patient has," again highlighting the importance of viewing the patient as a person rather than someone with an interesting disease or condition

"A doctor who treats himself has a fool for patient," something that all of us as doctors, do.

Thank you and have a good day.

Dr Pem Namgyal, 28 March 2026