Giving Thanks

Former UWA Chancellor Clinical Professor Alex Cohen, of the School of Medicine and Pharmacology, presented an address at a Memorial Ceremony in Winthrop Hall in 2005 which honoured those who had bequeathed their mortal remains to the science and learning of anatomy. The gathering comprised relatives, friends, staff, students, special guests and others. Please see related stories in the September issue of MeDeFacts. Here is the full address.

Lord, what is man that You care for him, or mortal man that you take account of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a fading shadow that passes away. In the morning he flourishes and sprouts afresh, in the evening he withers and dries up. (Psalm 144.3.4)

What is man? We must ever ask this question. The same question that has been asked since the first man and woman gazed wonderingly at the majestic progression of the stars; since the first babe developed slowly and miraculously out of rapturous union and the first man or woman bore the desolation of separation through the death of the other.

We acknowledge this as mystery, yet we seek constantly to penetrate its significance. There is source for great wonderment in the free and intricate movement of a hand, in the sustaining flow of milk from the breast and the strange, deeply drawn derivation of a sigh. These are the manifestations of the marvels of that body in which we dwell and from which we gaze about, give out and make our mark upon those we meet and love. On this earth it is the only vessel which we truly possess, to cherish or abuse; nurture or deprive; worship or disdain.

Structure, Form and Function – these are the three stepping stones to an understanding of the workings of the living being and, through these, to the noble task of relief of pain, physical distress and injury and the prolongation of life. Each has been studied and pursued over the centuries through the mists of superstition, prejudice and persecution; up through the forests of magic and religion and out onto the plains of objective observation and comparison. Those studies have brought us an awareness of what lies beneath the smooth folds and angular prominences of our skin, given us an understanding of the workings of those silent organs which serve to perpetuate the life force of our bodies and taken us into the mysteries of foetal development and birth. Anatomy and its ever widening sister disciplines have brought us this knowledge through that study of Structure, Function and Form.

From Anatomy flows the whole archetypal study of mankind, the proper study of which is man himself – as Alexander Pope so clearly perceived it. Ignorant of anatomy, those who deal with their fellow humans in attempts to care and cure, are like bumbling explorers without maps, or fumbling travellers in darkness without light. Anatomy provides the opening gambit for the deductive diagnosis of the physician, guides the knowing hand of the surgeon and the obstetrician, sets the stage for the appropriate ministrations of the anaesthetist and provides the radiologist with the illumination of those dark shadows with which he or she deals in critical familiarity. To the medical student it is amongst the earliest of exposures to the marvellous intricacies of life and, at the same time, a first contact with the eerie stillness and remoteness of death.
The medical and scientific professions know these things well and deeply respect the trust and generosity that brings them such enlightenment. How do others salute this knowledge in bringing them to an ultimate decision to consign their mortal remains for study? The answer must lie in the unanswered question from the Psalms with which I began.

**Lord, what is man?**

The answer lies within the question.

Man is that restless creature who seeks and seeks yet never truly finds. Each question, being answered, begets another which is equally pressing and tantalising to bring the totality marginally closer whilst always elusively far away. We are inundated with answers. They take the form of cautions, admonitions, warnings and innumerable statements of transient facts. They cause us to avoid a host of nutriments, a pantheon of simple pleasures, the sweet susceptibility of innocent transgression whilst embracing the obscuring strictures of dogma and dictum.

In the certitude of these answers the original question may be completely mislaid. In his insightful handbook "Religion for Atheists", Allain de Botton notes that atheists are so busy writing books and generally declaiming the reasons to justify their stance, that they lose the capacity to open their arms and give of themselves instead of holding them tightly across the body – and the mind – in defence of their bastions of disbelief.

One remembers the famous last words of the author Alice B Toklas on her deathbed with her life’s companion Gertrude Stein at her bedside. "Gertrude, Gertrude – What is the answer?" Stein, in one of her customary quotable quotes gives back to the moribund woman : "Alice, what is the question?"

It is this questioning, rendered orderly rather than at random which is the whole stimulus to Research. It is this questing that instils courage and reaffirms promise, confirms faith and renews hope. It is one of the greatest guarantees of unalloyed honesty and stands at the Gateway of Truth.

Far easier is it to answer what man is not. Not immortal, not perfect, not consistent, not all knowing, not omnipotent and yet, the self-recognition of all those negatives imbues mankind with a potential humility which, even if not always present, comes to the fore at the times of greatest reckoning and recall. It is at those times that the individual can make judgements reaching far beyond the experiences of life and can make decisions which transcend the greed of possession and the fickleness of fame.

It is to those who made such decisions that this day was dedicated. Their gift is acknowledged continuously in the fruits and rewards from their self-less generosity. By the medical and scientific community it is received with respect and used with care. The scientific and practical benefit which such a unique gift bestows cannot be measured even in the wonderfully impressive academic consequences and the workaday proficiency which has been the endowment of the gifting because, without
such altruism, the whole edifice of medical science and medical management would be threatened.

Although the anonymity of those present was preserved, it would have been crass and insensitive not to have marked the moment by some words to those present for whom the incompleteness of departure, the inconclusiveness of parting and the lack of finality of farewell would have left a void which the mundane and customary trappings of the funeral service seek to compensate.

The University honours and pays homage to those who have chosen to enrich its store of knowledge by this incomparable means, thus extending indefinable benefits to mankind. They truly exemplify the words of the Psalmist when he says:

So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts toward Wisdom.