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Final Thesis Assignment
January 23, 2015

Dr. A. T. Still and His Influence on Osteopathy

Dr. Andrew Taylor Still is credited with being the founder of Osteopathy as manual therapy and the philosophy surrounding it. Religious upbringing, having a father who was a heroic medical practitioner, renowned results from his osteopathic treatment, and being viewed as eccentric, to say the least, were just a few of the aspects of his life that had a profound effect on what osteopathy has become today. As stated by Emmons Rutledge Booth in *The History of Osteopathy*, “All the elements that have contributed to the advancement of Osteopathy are to be found in the very nature of its founder. And many of the elements that make Dr. Still what he has been and still is, are the results of the environments of his life” (Booth, 1). Over the course of this thesis, it will be illustrated how without Dr. Still in his vital role at the grassroots of the profession, osteopathy would not be what it is today.

Being brought up in the early 1800’s by a strict Methodist minister and heroic medical practitioner had a large influence on how Dr. Still viewed the world and how he came to shape the profession. Early Methodists were described as “sons of thunder” due to their intense preachings, terrifying descriptions of hell, and colourful interpretations of The Day of Judgement (Trowbridge, 2). Because of his father, Abram, “Still’s environment was emotionally charged with evangelism that instilled in him, perhaps more than others, the visions and responsibilities of reform” (Trowbridge, 2). I believe the religious teachings throughout his childhood lead Dr. Still to see the perfection in the human body because it was created by a perfect higher power. “With him, God is not simply a spiritual power but He is the Master Mechanic of the material universe, the crowning effort of His creative power being man” (Booth, 15). This belief in perfection led Still to look into the form and function of the human body more deeply, as well as how the body could move away from this state via disease and injury. “I resolved that I would take up the subject and ascertain by investigation...whether it could be proven as stated by the gray-headed sages of the pulpit, that the works of God would prove His perfection - A.T. Still” (Trowbridge, 3).

As mentioned in previous paragraphs, A.T. Still’s father was a heroic medical practitioner. Heroic medicine is described as any medicine or method of treatment that is very aggressive or risky in treating a dangerously ill patient and tends to refer to pre-scientific methods of 18th-century doctors (en.Citizendium.org). When Still was fourteen he was “salivated” which means that he was dosed with the preferred heroic medical treatment called calomel until he blacked out or began to salivate. The treatment had a profound affect on him, both physically and in the manner he viewed medical practice; “It loosened my teeth. Today I am using a part of a set of store teeth because I lived in a day and generation when people had no more intelligence than to make a cinnabar of my jawbone -A.T. Still” (Trowbridge, 17). Through this quote it is quite evident that Still disapproved of the medical treatment of the time and I believe this is where he decided that there must be a better, drug-free way to heal people.

Still's philosophy was holistic with a strong influence on health instead of disease. From his belief that the body is perfect because it is created by the Mechanic, four encompassing and concomitant ideas formed; "(1) the human body functions as a total biological unit, (2) the body possesses self-healing and self-regulating mechanisms, (3) structure and function are interrelated, and (4) abnormal pressure in one part of the body produces abnormal pressures and strains upon other parts of the body" (Trowbridge, xxii). Dr. Still would often be found in his backyard with bones attached with elastic bands, attaching and reattaching them, viewing their movement and symbiotic relationships. Through these hours of observation he found further evidence that the body must work as one complete unit. When A. T. Still was just ten years old he discovered something that related to both his first and second principles. This discovery occurred when swinging out in his backyard while experiencing a very painful headache.

"Thus I lay stretched on my back with my neck across the rope. ...got up in a little while with the headache all gone. I followed that treatment for twenty years before a wedge of reason reached my brain, and I could see that I had suspended the action of the great occipital nerves, and given harmony to the flow of the arterial blood to and through the veins, and the easy was the effect...- A.T. Still" (Booth, 45).

As illustrated in the above quote, the great occipital nerves had effect on his stomach and the headache associated with it, further illustrating how the body is one complete machine. Additionally, with a little outside influence, the body was able to alleviate the symptoms through self regulation. The body's ability to self-heal and self-regulate is a large part of the reason why Still did not believe in utilizing drugs to "cure" one's ailments and instead turned to a more holistic approach. "...I have lost all faith in medicine. I am satisfied that it is all wrong, and that the system of drugs, as curative agents, will some day be practically overturned, and some other system or method of curing the sick without drugs will take its place in healing the sick - A.T. Still" (Booth, 45). Structure and function are interrelated and this can be illustrated by looking into any aspects of the human body and its function. It has associated that need to be in the optimal position to move properly and have peak performance. For example, "taking a deep breath may be difficult if the ribs, diaphragm, or parts of the spine do not move well. When breathing is impaired, lymphatic drainage (necessary for clearing congestion and inflammation) will also be impaired. This may lead to the development of asthma or respiratory infections" (cranialacademy.com). The last aspect of the quote also illustrates how abnormal pressure on one part of the body creates abnormal pressures and strains in other parts of the body. In this case, it was a chain reaction from poor movement in the ribs, diaphragm, or parts of the spine, to impaired breathing, followed by impaired lymphatic drainage, to finally asthma or respiratory infections. This is an extreme but definitely plausible way how other parts of the body are interrelated and have a direct (or chained) effect on all other aspects of the human body. Overall, it is very clear that Dr. A. T. Still's philosophy aligns with drug free, holistic, and intuitive care.

One of the biggest influences on Osteopathy is the school that Dr. A. T. Still founded and the teaching he did both inside and outside its doors. In 1892 in Kirksville, Missouri A. T. Still opened the doors to The American School of Osteopathy (later renamed A. T. Still University) which was the first

osteopathic school (atsu.edu). On a personal note, opening the doors to female students from day one is a profound and lasting effect that Dr. Still provided that still shapes osteopathy today. As Stated by Still, "I opened wide the doors of my first school for ladies...Why not elevate our sisters' mentality, qualify her to fill all places of trust and honour, place her hand and head with the skilled arts?" (nationalacademyofosteopathy.com). Additionally, throughout the first 18 years of the school, approximately one-fifth of the students were women (osteopathyontario.org/). In a time when women had limited rights, never mind career options, this kind of forward thinking is not only why osteopathy is such an amazing field but I feel it has something to do with the rights we as females have today. Another overwhelming example of how Still left his mark on osteopathy is his astute and precise level of practice, particularly demonstrated by his work on Mrs. Harris. She was not able to raise her head, and suffered convulsions and cramps, was unconscious frequently, and was often vomiting (Booth, 27). All the traditional medical doctors had given up on her so a family friend suggested she try Dr. Still. He "...treated her for three months, since which time, about thirty years, she has more than the average share of good health allotted to her...It is needless to say that the Harris family have been staunch friends of Dr. Still and faithful advocates of Osteopathy ever since..." (Booth, 27). Through such acts of restorative health via osteopathy is just a few ways that his treatment and teachings of the science have influenced modern practice.

Staunch religious family life, viewing heroic medicine and the ravages it left behind in its wake first hand, and distinguished medical practice are all large aspects of Dr. Andrew Taylor Still's life that shaped him into the man who created the science and philosophy of Osteopathy. Drug free, holistic, intuitive, and natural practice were the main tenets of the philosophy that Still created. "... I said I did not believe God was a whiskey and opium drug-doctor; that I believed when He made man, that He put as many legs, noses, tongues, and qualities as he needed for any purpose in life for remedies and comfort - A. T. Still" (Booth, 21). It is this quote and his four interrelated principles of Osteopathy that I believe every Manual Osteopath should take with them each and every day of practice to more completely fulfill the profession that was given to us by Dr. Andrew Taylor Still.

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