September 24-25, 1959 – written in response to the Barney House letter of 9/18/1959 re his wife, mother, and daughter

Dear Bob,

Last July, you sent me a confidential copy of a letter you had sent to Dr. Orr in which you stated, inter alia, that you were the only Trustee who was not running for the AMA presidency. Ever since then I’ve been meaning to write to you because I remember a few years back when you did have hopes. Politics, medical or in public life, is a cruel business. One can never tell where lightning will strike. One cannot predict who will be chosen for high office, or why some make it and others don’t.

Those who are most faithful and work hardest may lose out. A newcomer arrives on the scene and highjacks the coveted post. Most notably there was Taft. He was positive he had the nomination. I often think of Sumner Wells and General MacArthur. Then there were McNutt and Ewing who aspired without much chance.

Many years ago Lloyd George said: “Life is made up of second bests.” True, isn’t it. So often one desires one thing and settles for something less. In your case, I wonder if you had a chance. Don’t you have to be a specialist to have an inside track? Isn’t that one reason why AAGP was formed, to give GPs an organization of their own? You’ve had the AAGP presidency, but that isn’t a stepping stone to the AMA presidency, is it? Well, it’s too bad. I wish you could have had it.

Now comes your latest note. How many private lives are full of tragedy! Yet, on balance, life seems to give a little more in satisfaction than it does in grief. The scales, in the long run, seem generally to tip to the favorable side. Very early in my life as I was developing my religious beliefs and a philosophy of life, I read Thomas Huxley’s letters. There was one he wrote about a century ago that has influenced my life more than any other printed words. It was written to Rev. Charles Kingsley on the death of Huxley’s first-born son at the age of five. In it Huxley presented his religious beliefs and his philosophy. I have read that letter many times. One idea particularly appealed to me. Huxley said that we settle our accounts on the Ledger of the Almighty each day. (As you know, he did not believe in a system of rewards and punishments after death). He said that as we live we are punished for our sins and rewarded for our virtues and for living the good life. Some days the Ledger winds up in the red; others in the black. But, as a whole, the rewards exceed the punishments, else would we not be able to go on living. I think that is true. One may not be ecstatically happy often, but one does experience a feeling of satisfaction with a day well lived. There are pleasures and mild enjoyments when ecstasy is missing. There are rewards, often not visible to the world, but experienced in private by the individual. Public acclaim is exhilarating. But the public is fickle. In the long run a steady succession of personal satisfactions may be more soothing and helpful than a single year of tumultuous acclaim, banquets, speeches, etc., followed by near oblivion.

I think, possibly, you get by with the aid of the satisfaction you feel as you help someone think through a problem or regain health. It sounds trite, but there really is more genuine satisfaction – if not ecstasy – in being useful, in doing the best of which you are capable, and in meeting life’s problems with such fortitude as you can muster. I think one must develop little schemes to carry one through the depths and over the bumps. I find my greatest solace in my garden. Late at night I can forget the world and all my tribulations for a while by reading one of the finer bulb and flower catalogues or by working out plans for a final home. I can lose myself in planning flower beds, studying planting instructions, etc.

When I was a child I set up a number of devices for myself because I was alone so much. I spent endless hours on top of an old-fashioned ice box along with my cat, my doll, and a copy of Robinson Crusoe. I had a beautifully illustrated edition, which I read and reread, always imagining myself in Crusoe’s place. Such fun! Then I made up endless games that I could play alone on a hideous rug we had in the “parlor.” The rug was red and green, neatly woven in geometric patterns. I had about a dozen dolls who, if they could have learned all I taught them, would have been the world’s marvels. When vacations came I set myself study tasks. One summer I decided to do a year of English history which I needed for college entrance. I read straight through five volumes, fat ones, on English history, assigning so many pages each day and giving myself examinations. Then I took the regular student test and came through with 95%. The only question I missed was the provisions of the Magna Carta, which indicated a youthful lack of appreciation about what really mattered. Anyway, I kept myself entertained and out of mischief – in the main.

I was an only child. My father a chronic invalid for 40 yrs., spending most of his time in his room. My mother, very brilliant, was first a teacher then a social worker. She was out nearly every night engaged in saving humanity. I was alone after school and in the evenings. By the time I was 12, I was running the house, handling the family budget, shopping, cooking, cleaning, and ironing. I had no social life at all. In all my childhood I never had a friend to visit me. For one thing, we didn’t have any money. Doctor’s bill arrived monthly like gas and electric bills. My father, through his writing, managed to pay for GP and surgical care. Nothing more. I couldn’t even afford to treat schoolmates to five-cent sodas, so I rejected all social contacts, feeling my inability to keep up my end of things. So it was that I developed by own patterns of activity with lots of studying. I can’t recall ever having had a dull moment. My little mind was full of plans for what I was going to do next. Then, too, we had a large library and I just went right through it – history, English classics, travel, and loads of Latin, science, and mathematics. When I was 16, I was such a smarty in math, that my teacher got special permission for me to use the library at Columbia University so that I could read ancient books on mathematics.

I’ve had a tremendously interesting, active life. True, I never wanted a career. I just wanted a happy marriage, six children, and NO career. I was terribly averse to career women. I loved to cook and keep house. So what happened? I finished up with four major careers in succession, a half century of business and professional life, and NO children. That’s the way the cookie breaks! I’ve spent my life in the shadow of family illness – 40 yrs. for my father, 10 for my mother, 15 for my husband. I was a puny youngster, not expected to get through childhood. I had a gastro-intestinal condition in my twenties that baffled the specialists. I suffered terribly. A dean at Columbia’s Physicians and Surgeons just about gave me up as a dead duck. I was fed up with suffering and decided to see what I could do for myself. I made a little vow 40 years ago that I’d never consult a physician again, never go to a hospital, never take any drugs, and that I’d have perfect health. That’s just what I’ve done. I’ve never even had any shots or sedatives. I feel like a million dollars. No pain anywhere. Eat what I like, when I like. Radiant, abundant health! I’m no faddist nor Christian Scientist. I try to lead a reasonable existence. This past year I worked too long hours and became terribly tired. That’s why I took a vacation, though I couldn’t afford to and didn’t have the time to spare. I simply will not let life ruin my health.

I know how tough it must be for you to be alone. A man seems worse off alone than does a woman, because he seems less able to look after himself. My college chum recently suffered a complete mental collapse when her husband died of cancer of the colon. She had no outside interests and was a very dependent person. She was sent to a private institution where, miraculously, she was restored to reasonably sound condition. She has bought a house near the hospital and is living alone. I’ve had rather close contacts with two families in which mental illness took a severe toll. Perhaps time will be on your side.”

. . . . .

(con’t.) Same letter, next day, 9/25/1959

I didn’t mail this last night. Perhaps I shouldn’t have started to write in the first place, shouldn’t have said anything about my personal affairs. I never do. My closest personal friends aren’t close. Your letter about your own existence prompted me to speak of my own. But I see I have left big gaps, not touching on the important things at all. So here’s a fill-in.

My mother was stern, puritanical. Came from a long line of Methodists, but in middle life she left the church. I was brought up strictly, not in any church but according to a demanding ethical code – truth, honor, obligations, duty. I was to be seen and not heard. I was to obey without question. When I was three I told a little lie to escape punishment. My sin was magnified. I came to hate a lie like poison. On that indoctrination I later wrecked my life.

I zoomed through college in three years. Nearly all As, Phi Beta Kappa. No social life. I made up my mind I’d go to Junior Prom or bust. Since I couldn’t dance I paid for dancing lessons. I went to the Prom and danced until 5:00 a.m. fearful that I’d never dance again. That’s how it turned out.

I fell in love with a distinguished scientist. We were engaged. We were wonderfully well matched. He wanted me to take a Ph.D. degree in science so that we could work together. I did brilliantly in science, reaching the top early, winning fellowships in scientific societies, etc. Then I found my friend had lied to me in a certain narrow area. That triggered a chain reaction in me. I broke our engagement and my own heart. His pleadings and explanations were in vain. Had I had more contacts with people, known more about life, I would have understood and forgiven. I was unyielding. He died later without my having told him what a fool I had been. The situation took a great deal out of both of us. I went on alone in science for five years, then simply closed the books on my scientific career. I couldn’t bear the loneliness. My heart didn’t mend. I went through the motions. Research, publications in leading scientific journals, offers of good jobs, applause at meetings. I didn’t care. Actually, it was my heart, not my brains, that made me tick. I resigned from my scientific position; stored my books, sold my furniture and set out on a 2,000 mile hike to think.

I went into business where I succeeded as an executive in financial management and promotion. I met and married Bill. He was kind. I still dreamed of home and children. Several years after we married, we both lost our jobs in the depression. We were cleaned out. I was unemployed for eight months. Nearly starved. Wouldn’t go on relief. Borrowed $2.50 a week for food from an old friend and kept us alive. Bill was too old to get back into the labor market. He didn’t earn a cent for the next 20 years. I started at the bottom in public administration in 1934 and quickly rose to a good position, moving from N.Y. to Washington in 1935, riding in with the New Deal.

A few years later, my husband’s health started to fail. Wrong diagnosis for two years. Then cancer discovered. $20,000 medical and hospital expense. Five major operations. I had gradually come to realize that my husband married me for home and companionship and because I had a Ph.D. degree. He was proud of me. I did not learn until I was past 60 that he had never intended to have children by me. He had had three by a prior marriage and didn’t want any more. I felt cheated. I should at least have been given a chance to decide whether or not I wanted marriage on those terms. I made a home. I provided companionship. For the past 15 yrs. I have added nursing care. I had had little or nothing that a woman desires. No social life. Never go to the theatre. Home every night in silence. Eight-room house (part for business). Barn-like, you said. I know what you mean.

Work has been my salvation. I have driven myself unmercifully. Terribly long hours. I like to work. But I like other things, too. Things I can’t have. I’ve thought of alternatives. It’s no go. I’m not the type to engage in extra-curricular activities. Divorce is not for me. Marriage is for keeps – for better or worse, though I made no such promise. Suicide is a possibility, but I have not thought that was a legitimate way to solve life’s problems. Some situations, I conclude, do not have satisfactory solutions. You’re stuck with a situation. Thus, within the limitations of the situation, you work out a way of life. That’s what I have done.

For me, it isn’t too bad. I do feel that a woman who doesn’t have children might just as well not have been born. Compensations and adjustments aren’t very satisfying. But here I am. Alive. The gift of life – about which I was not consulted – is precious. I feel I have an obligation to make the most of it, not to squander it. I have no feeling of conviction that I shall have any future after death. I settle things day by day as I go along. If there is anything after death, I’ll take my chances with everyone else. It sure isn’t one of the things I worry about. My religious beliefs are such that I depend entirely upon myself for motive power, for ethical decisions. I have never felt the need of prayer. I don’t believe in vicarious atonement. I don’t think I can pass the buck for my sins to anyone. I just have myself to blame and I’m sure punished – especially when I deliberately do something that I know to be wrong for me under my code.

But I’m half Irish. Have a lot of ebullience. I bounce back, read for the next round. Interested in life as a great adventure. It’s exciting to speculate what may be around the next corner, hidden from view. It may be just another sock on the head. Then, again, it could be some wonderful surprise.

Perhaps the most important thing is to recognize the limitations of one’s existence. Life sets up certain boundaries. But within the limitations one can do a good deal. One can cultivate the soil intensively within the boundaries. A degree of happiness can be achieved. Accomplishments are possible. One can, from the depths of one’s own experience, help and comfort others who have a hard row to hoe.

I’ve never been able to fathom why there should be so much unhappiness and suffering in the world. I can’t see what good is accomplished in many instances. Why should a life full of promise be snuffed out? Why should a happy marriage be broken by death? Why do the wicked flourish – or seem to? All very mysterious. I don’t spend much time on speculations because I don’t think I’d get anywhere. Just take things as they come. One of these days, if I should ever be free of obligations, I’m going to spend a year going around the world, somehow. Tramp steamer, maybe.

Now, young man, this is a privileged communication. I invoke your Hippocratic oath to protect the contents. Don’t you dare breathe a word of all this. If I ever hear any rumors about myself, I’ll know you have spilled the beans because I haven’t opened up to anyone else. My darned fool existence is too complicated to become a conversation piece. So I just clam up. Better burn, not file, this letter.

Sincerely,