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Catholic Physicians' Guild

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## "WHEN LIFE ROLLS BACK ON YOU"

It was springtime in the Lothian countryside in 1875. Robert Louis Stevenson, in a hired cab, was taking his friend, W. E. Henley, on an excursion. Henley had been a patient in the Royal Infirmary since the summer of 1873. Now, at last, he had come back again into the world.

Springtime was at its "top," with a blue sky, and a hazy, tranquil afternoon, with the world "mad with green." And Stevenson writes: "You may imagine what it was to a man who has been eighteen months in a hospital ward. The look on his face was as wine to me . . . I stopped him at the Bridge to let him enjoy the great cry that goes up to Heaven out of the river beds, and he asked (more than once) 'What noise is that?' 'The water.' 'O!' almost incredulously . . . I have lost the sense of wonder, of course, but there must have been something to wonder at, for Henley has eyes and ears and an immortal soul of his own."

Henley himself knew that it would be an experience of wonder to be out again in the world—a world that had seemed like a thing of dreams when heard only in sounds and echoes through a hospital window. His series of poems "In Hospital" ends with one named "Discharged":

Carry me out  
Into the world and the sunshine,  
Into the beautiful world.  
O, the wonder, the spell of the streets!  
The stature and strength of the horses,  
The flat roar and rattle of the  
wheels! . . .

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Free . . .

Dizzy, hysterical, faint,  
I sit, and the carriage rolls on with me  
Into the wonderful world.

It is the prison-like life of the sick that gives the outer world its tremendous satisfaction. This was clearly understood by Florence Nightingale. In her little book, "Notes on Nursing," she had this to say:

"To any but an old nurse, or an old patient, the degree would be quite inconceivable to which the nerves of the sick suffer from seeing the same walls, the same ceiling, the same surroundings during a long confinement in one or two rooms."

She recommended that any variety would be valuable, even if only a few flowers. When she had been ill of the cholera in the Crimean War, and in a rough hut with nothing more than the knots in the wood to gaze upon, she attributed the beginning of her recovery to "a nosegay of wild flowers being sent to me."

The restlessness of patients, she believed, has its greatest source in the desire to get back again into the world. For this reason, they long even to get a view from a window; it would not show much of the world, but it would show something.

She knew that those who are not ill, but are able to move about the streets, might little think of their benefits. Yet the benefits are very real. "You who believe yourselves overwhelmed with anxieties," she said, "but are able every day to walk up Regent Street, or out in the country . . . you little know how much your anxieties are thereby light-

ened . . ." For such privileges the sick yearn.

How well she understood the mind of the sick may be seen in many a record left of a patient's thoughts in the long, empty days. The 19th century English preacher and social reformer, W. J. Fox, has left a vivid account of his state of mind during an illness in 1822.

In a thanksgiving sermon, on his return to his church, he spoke of the longing that a sick person feels in "watching the gradual fading of day into night, and again the gradual brightening of night into day, but without exertion in the one, or repose in the other; seeing inanimate nature . . . all moving, rolling on, and answering the great end of its being without knowing it, while with us consciousness is only that of passive existence; hearing from afar the bustle and stir of this mighty world, where there is so much doing and so much to be done . . ."

It is the deliverance from this im-

prisonment that gives the world a new wonder of sound and color and meaning. It is like a rebirth, a coming back into life. George Meredith speaks of it as the time "when life rolls back on you after the long ebb of illness." The return of the tide comes with its own crystal glory, as though bearing the freshness of a forgotten morning with it, as it hastens back to its familiar shore.

Of course, the magic will fade. W. E. Henley, many years later, made a sentimental pilgrimage back to the countryside Stevenson and he, after his discharge from hospital, had visited together. It was springtime again, and he sat by the bridge and listened to the murmurs of the water.

The magic had gone from the scene, but not from the memory. If the world could never be quite the same again as in that experience, neither could it ever be quite the same after it. The excited gratitude for life at such a time leaves a hidden sanctuary, even when the splendor fades.

## Important Events . . . June 24 . . . San Francisco

**Memorial Mass** for deceased members National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds and the American Medical Association

Old St. Mary's Church — 660 California Avenue  
8:00 a.m.

Most Reverend Joseph T. McGucken, S.T.D., LL.D.  
Archbishop of San Francisco—celebrant

**Buffet Breakfast**—Sir Francis Drake Hotel  
9:00 a.m.

### **Annual Executive Board Meeting**

National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds  
Sir Francis Drake Hotel  
10:00 a.m. — 1:30 p.m.