The Genius

In my observations of people over four decades I have learnt some fundamental truths. One that interests me most is that the Human Mind has two distinct parts; A Destructive and A Constructive part. The large majority use the destructive part for individual advancement. A small minority will use the constructive part for universal benefit. It is these individuals who ultimately come to be recognized as Genius, for their enormous contribution to life on earth. One such individual is Leonardo Da Vinci, (1452 –1519) who inspires me in my own spheres of work.

"Iron rusts from disuse, stagnant water loses its purity and in cold weather becomes frozen; even so does inaction sap the vigour of the mind."

Leonardo’s life had its own intrigue, however, here we are concerned about his mind. His contributions encompass a wide range of subjects. A painter, sculptor, anatomist, thinker, scientist all in one. In an era when intellectual property rights did not exist Leonardo devised his own method of keeping a secret. He wrote his notes backwards so that you could only read it in a mirror.

His drawings of the human body, the descriptions of anatomy, his ideas on the functioning of the Aortic Valve precede Henry Gray’s textbook of anatomy by centuries. His methods of study of the physiology were ingenious. There was no system in the human body that he had not studied and described in precise detail.

An astronomer, botanist, geologist, mathematician, physicist and a naturalist, Leonardo’s notes and writings on these subjects are even today extremely relevant. His ability to observe, absorb and assimilate information was legendary. His description of the flight of birds, how they use the various parts of their wings and how these affect flight, led him to develop a design for a flying machine which stood the test of time.

In the area of arts Leonardo was an accomplished painter, sculptor, musician whose perception of color, form, figure and their use in his hands defied description. The legendary Mona Lisa with her enigmatic smile has been a subject of much debate for centuries. In recent times computer aided studies even suggest that Mona Lisa was indeed a self-portrait of Leonardo that was transformed with stunning effect. He was capable of communicating emotions effectively in his paintings. It is believed that in painting the Last Supper, Leonardo searched the city for the right faces, appearances etc. to put in the exact descriptions that he had in his mind. Leonardo could transform music into pictures, and pictures into music, and was completely adept at maximizing his sensory perception.

In humanities he was a philosopher, teacher and historian. In Leonardo’s notes, paintings and other works one can easily discern the complete use of the senses, the skills and perceptions. Like all accomplished intellectuals Leonardo worked alone. Solitude was his forte. In isolation he found time to contemplate and consolidate his thoughts. He took frequent breaks from his work to divert his ever-thinking mind in order to refresh his thoughts and improve his concentration.

I quote one of his aphorisms

"You know that medicines when well used restore health to the sick: they will be well used when the doctor together with his understanding of their nature shall understand also what man is, what life is, and what constitution and health are. Know these well and you will know their opposites; and when this is the case you will know well how to devise a remedy."

What is the relevance of all this to the Surgeon? Why should one extoll the virtues of this legendary genius of yore?

As physicians, surgeons, scientists and teachers we have everything to gain from this one person’s life. A study of the methods he adapted in his life and its application in our day to day functioning can transform our very thinking leading us to greater and more fulfilling performance. I would urge everyone to read, absorb and aquire at least some of the skills Leonardo had in order to improve perception and performance that will ultimately benefit patients who seek our help.

Three of the books on Leonardo da Vinci that are worth reading.

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The Genius (Korean: 지니어스, a.k.a. 'The Genius Game') is a South Korean reality game show that was broadcast on cable channel tvN. The first season began airing on April 26, 2013, and the show proved to be a hit for tvN. Subsequently, three other seasons were aired in 2014 and 2015. Each season consists of 12 episodes with 13 contestants. One player is eliminated in every episode, and the final player left standing is named the champion of the season.