

Could Chekhovian Humanism Help Us Today?*

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In 1884 Anton Pavlovich Chekhov graduated from the Medical School and started working as a physician in a suburban Moscow hospital. Eight years later he set up a general practice in Melikhovo, 70 km south of Moscow, where he spent seven years as a country doctor and a writer. There, Chekhov saw hundreds of patients, made over 1,000 house calls, fought against cholera and illiteracy, wrote many stories and two plays: *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*. He started his day at five in the morning at his office where he examined patients and performed minor surgical procedures. Chekhov was an idealist and hard-working doctor driven by his dedication to serve patients in rural Russia where corruption and incompetence ruled at all levels. He did not charge his patients although he ran a private practice. He frequently even bought for his patients needed medications and gave them useful non-medical advice and financial help. Thus, the peasants called him “an unusual doctor” [1].

Today, Russia and other Eastern European countries are subjected to the period of rapid transition from a socialistic to a capitalistic economy. A fraction of the population hurries to privatize some property that used to belong to the state. Greed dominates in this race, and even some physicians participate in this contest; while working in the state health system, they ask for bribes. The most aggressive of them hope to purchase, overnight, some property, open private clinics or even a hospital. Bribery and other ethical lapses among medical doctors and other professionals show us that human nature is still flawed. We need contemporary Chekhovian examples to inspire mankind. The Germans do not in vain have a saying: *Nur ein guter Mensch kann ein guter Arzt sein* (Only a good man can be a good medical doctor).

Doctor-Writer

As a young physician, Chekhov started a personal battle with lung tuberculosis, which lasted for 20 years. On July 15, 1904, Koch's bacillus ended his courageous battle against the disease. At that time medicine had only modest treatments for this infectious disease, such as providing adequate nutrition and rest to increase the body's defenses against the tubercle ba-



Figure 1. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov.

cillus (streptomycin, the first effective antimycobacterial medication, was discovered during the WWII, four decades after Chekhov's death from the disease that had threatened humanity for thousands of years). Although Chekhov for some time doubted the diagnosis, the first haemoptysis that occurred in 1884 and the many subsequent episodes must have caused him tremendous anxiety and emotional distress.

Because he sensed his early death, Chekhov, like many other tubercular patients, became tremendously active. He was a prolific writer and a dedicated doctor. Chekhov and several other doctor-writers, such as two Serbian classic writers, Laza K. Lazarević (1851-1891) and Jovan Jovanović-Zmaj (1833-1904), refuted Tolstoy's assertion that medicine stands in the doctor-writer's way. However, some writers – like Bulgakov (1891-1940) – who were educated as physicians, gave up medicine for writing. Chekhov clearly showed that the symbiosis of the muse and Zesculapius may increase the writer's capabilities. His explanation is as follows: "My medical studies have had a serious effect on my writing. They have taught me how to classify my observations and they have enriched my observations" [2]. At the height of Chekhov's early literary success, Alexei Suvorin, his friend and editor had urged the young writer to give up medicine. "Medicine is a waste of your time and energy. Take my advice; you'd better learn to play the game. Become more focused. You'll never reach your potential unless you concentrate on writing." In response, the writer wrote a famous passage on the integration of the arts of medicine and writing. "You advise me not to chase after two hares at once and to forget about practicing medicine. Well, I don't see what's so impossible about chasing two hares at once ... Medicine is my lawful wedded wife and literature my mistress. When one gets on my nerves, I spend the night with the other. This may be somewhat disorganizing, but then again it's not boring, and anyway, neither losses anything by my duplicity."

The doctor-writer situation is possibly a source of Chekhov's contradiction: he was so different as an artist and as a medical doctor. As a doctor, he was a man of action (he founded schools and clinics for the peasants in the Melikhovo region, donated books to libraries, always was ready to help patients, and pursued humanitarian causes), while, on the contrary, a majority of the protagonists in his stories and plays show weakness, passivity, and ineffectiveness. Perhaps his own disease and his medical experiences taught him to explore a new direction in literature. Chekhov gradually realized that scientific rationalism could not give us the answers to some important questions, such as

what is the meaning of life, and he explored the distinctive individual events that present man as a victim in an absurd world. Unquestionably, thanks to his literary talent and his unique approach to the meaning of life, Chekhov improved both the modern story and modern play, and it is hard to decide if he accomplished more as a dramatist or storyteller.

A visit to Sakhalin island

In 1890, Chekhov made a journey across Siberia to the island of Sakhalin. Not only criminals, but many Russian writers and political prisoners had made involuntary, and in most cases one-way, journeys to Siberia, but none had made a voluntary exploration [3]. If Chekhov reached Sakhalin at all, he would be the only Russian on the island that would not be prisoner. The hardships of that journey, and the three-month sojourn on this convict island were frightful. Chekhov had carefully studied the prison conditions there, and he collected data for the medical geography of the island. He returned from Sakhalin to Odessa by the sea. He embarked on the steamer *Petersburg* at Vladivostok with more than three hundred soldiers returning from service in the Far East. During the trip he was really frightened during a storm in the China Sea when the Captain told the passengers who had revolvers to keep them loaded, since death by shooting was preferable to death by drowning. Later on, two soldiers died in the ship's hospital, and they were buried at sea-their bodies were thrown overboard in a sailcloth shroud [3]. These burials inspired Chekhov to write "Gusev," a story of the death of a tubercular soldier buried at sea, that was praised by many, including Tchaikovsky who was deeply moved by the tale.

Why would a sick young physician go on a 5,000 km suicidal journey to visit mainly political prisoners? "All civilized Europe knows that it is not the wardens who are to blame, but all of us; yet this is not a concern of ours, we are not interested", wrote Chekhov to his friend Suvorin. This visit and Chekhov's report, "The Island of Sakhalin" in which he drew the attention of the Russian society to the misery of 10,000 convicts, soon forced the Czar to implement some reforms.

In the Island of Sakhalin, Chekhov gave an impressive description of the brutal beatings, which were committed on an almost casual basis to male and female prisoners alike:

"The executioner stands to one side and strikes in such a way that the lash falls across the body. After every five strokes he goes to the other side and the prisoner is permitted a half-minute

rest ... After the first five or ten strokes his body, covered with scars from previous beatings, turns blue and purple, and his skin bursts at each stroke ... And later, after twenty or thirty strokes, he complains like a drunken man or like someone in delirium: 'Poor me, you are murdering me...'

The warden cries, 'Forty-two! Forty-three!' It is a long way to ninety."

This description made such an impression on the Russian public that it helped to bring about the abolition of corporal punishment - in 1897 for women and in 1904 for men [4]. The campaign was led by medical doctors.

During the days most critical for disintegrated Yugoslavia[†], I published an article on Chekhov [5]. The goal was to draw attention to the compassion of that writer-doctor and humanist, including his visit to the Sakhalin island, so that his example might inspire us, medical workers and others, to re-examine the phenomenon of greed manifested in many sectors of the society.

Epilogue

Another humanist, Dante, suggests in *Il Convivio* (The Banquet) that the greatest danger to mankind comes from avarice. Wealth is not equally distributed, and the craving for it is the greatest danger to humanity. To satisfy such desire you inevitably cause injury to others. Dante even believed he had the solution to avoiding war, but his idea unfortunately did not influence the rulers who often prefer to solve problems militarily. Chekhov went a step further than Dante; he personally sacrificed himself when he journeyed to the convict island, managed to draw the attention of the society, and who then exerted pressure on the authorities to force them to implement reforms.

Let us hope that before long strong and creative persons will come up with a modern formula to inspire us to wage a battle with words against those armed with modern weaponry, as efficient as the one used by Chekhov. The author of this presentation has envisioned a salutary formula but only in his dreams [6]:

Dream

*Last night I dreamed that I was declaring war
On all the armies on this planet.*

*"I have no fear of guns, bombs, or rockets.
I have no army; words are my weapons."*

*I was appealing to unarmed masses to seek justice,
Not to be afraid of any army,
And I was crying out: "Words are our weapons!"*

*To the armed I sent word to abandon guns:
"Soldiers and terrorists, beware of your unarmed brethren,
Because the word of the people is the strongest weapon!"*

*With a start, I woke up from this century's last night
Feeling unhappy that on this planet justice must wait.
Will the time ever come when sober reality
Will wake up masses from their profound sleep?*

*PS: Chilean brother Pablo unfurled
A message that the majority did not get.*

*"Oh beautiful is this planet,
I came to live in this world."*

*"For a formula to prevent every unnecessary tomb,
To be secure as when sheltered in the womb,
A man doesn't need the help of a smart dolphin's steer"
Exclaims Dudley, my distinguished peer.*

*Dear reader and distinguished friend,
Every war represents humanity's end.*

Pablo – Pablo Neruda, the 1971 Nobel prize-winning Chilean poet.
Dudley – Dudley Herschbach, the 1986 Nobel Prize-winning US scientist.

Notes

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†The disintegration of the former Yugoslavia started in 1991. Unfortunately, several Western countries stimulated this disintegration and contributed to the initiation and maintenance of the war. In 1999, the NATO forces launched the 78-day bombing campaign against F.R. Yugoslavia, which was composed of Serbia and Montenegro. Despite the NATO presence in Kosovo, more than 300,000 Serbs fled their homes during the period of the Kosovo Albanians "revenge" attacks. The Kosovo Serbs are still in refugee camps. Also in the presence of the NATO forces, the Kosovo Albanians destroyed numerous Christian sites at this cradle of the Serbian history, culture, and religion. A hundred thousand Serbs and other non-Albanians who stayed in their homes in Kosovo live in tiny enclaves, ghettos, under insufficient NATO protection.

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