



Creation and Dust: The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

By Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

THE FIELD OF MEDICINE blends optimism and pessimism, scientific progress and philosophical fatalism. We are cheerleaders for our patients' recoveries and symbolic pallbearers at their inevitable funerals. We are the purveyors of hopefulness and the truth tellers of mortality. As with clinical practice, so with broad aspects of our society's health. Age-adjusted cardiovascular disease has been reduced by potent drugs and interventions but more patients are now living with severe congestive heart failure. Rates of COPD are down but rates of asthma are up. Psychiatric medications are better but rates of depression and suicide are increasing. Treatment options for diabetes have expanded while rates of obesity and its comorbidities continue to rise.

Perhaps this notion of the world as triumph and terror is encoded in human nature itself. There is a teaching story attributed to the Hasidic Rabbi Bunim, who lived in what is now Poland in the late 18th and early 19th century, that has always struck me as an apt summary of this dual nature of our lives:

Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: "For my sake was the world created."

But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: "I am but dust and ashes."

In this poem, "Creation and Dust," I have taken this notion by Rabbi Bunim and used it in a rhyming meditation on the modern world with both its incredible range of progress and its discouraging trends. **SDP**



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Creation And Dust

The screen streams continuous outrage
While tragedies beg to be solved
Dopamined pleasure and rampage
Keep us thrilled yet scarcely involved

Superficial is hotly debated
Essential is barely discussed
For you the world was created
You are nothing but ashes and dust

The voices of kindness and reason
Too often drowned out by the crowd
To point out the truth can be treason
For saying what's so and out loud

Virtue becomes dissipated
While ambition's ascent is robust
For you the world was created
You are nothing but ashes and dust

The staunchest agreements can fumble
Unless they are freshly renewed
The strongest of structures can crumble
Breaking down to bacterial food

Chemical laws demonstrate it
Oxidation turns steel to rust
For you the world was created
You are nothing but ashes and dust

We question the notion of progress
Of rising tides raising all boats
Our ship seems hijacked by pirates
Who are holding their shivs to our throats

With hope for the future deflated
Our vision's been forced to adjust
For you the world was created
You are nothing but ashes and dust

Then what kind of map guides our travel?
Which are the standards to choose?
With conventional wisdom unravelled
And all the old knots shaken loose

Success may be much overrated
But failure's an ongoing bust
For you the world was created
You are nothing but ashes and dust

Take into account all these features
Our species blends scoundrel and saint
The most contradictory creatures
A mosaic of crime and restraint

Render your plans calibrated
Do what you can and you must
For you the world was created
You are nothing but ashes and dust