



Random Truths and Universal Nonsense

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Many of you know that I have given a few addresses of this type in the past, and that they tend to be unconventional. I talk about what I have learned, what I have failed to learn, what I hope to learn, and what I likely never will learn. Like some of you, I am more introvert than extrovert, and I often walk around absorbed in my own thoughts while other people wonder what in the world I am thinking about. The older I get, the more I look for meaning in things that are perfectly meaningless and purpose in things that are perfectly purposeless. I seek answers to questions that cannot be answered, and search for universal truths out of random nonsense. Perhaps the best I ever do is to discover random truths and universal nonsense. So, for those of you who were expecting a normal presidential address, I apologize in advance for this exercise in finding deeper meaning in everyday things.

If you are like me, and unfortunately I suspect that many of you are, you have spent much of your career focused on the practice of surgery, along with research, teaching, administration, and service of various sorts. You may have spent very little time and effort devoted to your own health, fitness, and well-being. When people would ask me what I liked to do outside of work, I was always a little embarrassed, because I had no good answer except: "I like to spend time with my family." When asked if I had any hobbies, I would get a sheepish look on my face as I tried to determine whether anything I did would count as a hobby—as if maybe throwing all of my loose change in a jar counted as numismatics.

They now call this work/life balance (in fact, they have for a long time). Perhaps you missed the memo, like I did. Well, not so many years ago, I decided that maybe it was time to start doing a few things outside of work that I enjoyed. I had played tennis in high school, and after a couple of decades off, I decided to play again. I sometimes coerce my residents or students to come play tennis with

me, but most often I go hit tennis balls for an hour with Ylia, my tennis coach. I decided that I like tennis a whole lot more than running on a treadmill, so I do this whenever I can, often 4 or 5 times per week. If nothing else works, I have a 9:00 to 10:00 PM block of time. Despite countless hours of practice, I cannot say I am getting any better; perhaps at least I am not getting worse. Nevertheless, I continue to try to improve. Ylia repeatedly admonishes me to watch the ball, move my feet, prepare early, etc. Yet, every time, no matter how hard I try, I continue to make the same mistakes over and over again.

My natural response to making mistakes is frustration. I hang my head. I talk to myself, and the language is not very uplifting. I am not preparing for Wimbledon here. I do not play matches or play in a league. I am only playing against myself. So in addition to practicing tennis, I practice managing my response to frustration and disappointment. I try to keep my head up and maintain a positive attitude. I try to remember that I am playing tennis because I love to play tennis. I say that I *try* to do this, but I am not very good at it. It is incredibly difficult to overcome the natural tendency for self-criticism.

Excellence happens when dedication, hard work, and deliberate practice are built upon a platform of God-given talent. We all have strengths and weaknesses, innate talents, and realistic limitations. Although I may have expectations for myself that exceed my God-given talent and ability, it is important to understand my limitations. Satisfaction and fulfillment are the results of striving to achieve our greatest potential.

In life, as in tennis and surgery, we make mistakes—sometimes the same mistakes over and over. It is easy to be so frustrated with your mistakes that you forget that you are capable of exceptional things. But if you continue to try to focus on what matters most, slowly, perhaps imperceptibly, you will make yourself and those around you better. Do not forget that what we ordinarily do as surgeons, day in and day out, is extraordinary to the rest of the world.

So remember, keep your head up.

Without challenge, there is no reward.

Without failure, there is no victory.

The more mature tennis players among us may remember a popular book from the 1970s: *The Inner Game of Tennis*, by Timothy Gallwey. Gallwey argues

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that too much instruction about how to correct all of the flaws in our game causes us to consciously think about too many things at once, leading to even worse performance. Combining a healthy measure of 1970's Zen mysticism with sports psychology, he argues that if we simply quiet our minds, relax, and focus intently on watching the ball, the tennis strokes will correct themselves. The great players like Roger Federer and Serena Williams watch the ball better than everyone else. After they have struck the ball, their eyes are still focused on the site of impact, not looking to see where the ball is going. They already know where the ball is going. This sounds simple enough. Just watch the ball. How hard can that be? Yet, no matter how many times I try, I find it impossible to maintain absolute focus on the tennis ball. Drenched in sweat after an hour of tennis, I may have hit all manner of terrible shots long, wide, and into the net. But usually, at some point during that hour, for one brief shining moment, I experience a flash of brilliance as I rip a vicious cross-court backhand winner or blast an inside-out forehand like I was 17 years old again. These are the moments I live for, when all of my training and practice culminate in an instant of higher accomplishment. That is what makes it all worthwhile. Then I quickly realize that I am not as young or quick or flexible as I used to be and the aches and pains do not go away as quickly as they used to.

Similar to tennis, surgery requires long years of training and practice. The intense preparation and concentration required for performance of an intricate and challenging operation is what distinguishes a great surgeon from a good one. With all of the distraction and pressure we face in and out of the operating room, it is easy to forget the fundamental joy of a thoughtfully planned and precisely executed operation that gives our patients the best chance of a good outcome. This state of relaxed concentration, in which we focus so intently that we lose all sense of time, is when we are at our best. It is a time when all of our training and experience coalesce to produce excellence. It is the epitome of all human performance, in sports, surgery, research, and all other endeavors.

So remember, keep your eye on the ball.

The other thing that great tennis players do better than anyone else is shrug off the last bad shot, game, set, or match, and put it behind them. They have an amazing resilience that allows them to reset after experiencing intense frustration and disappointment. The best players can do this especially well at the most crucial times during the match. Through conflict, they develop confidence. Through defeat, they learn perseverance. Confidence is essential for victory. Overconfidence invariably leads to defeat.

Many years ago, I was at a national surgical meeting, hanging out at the bar with friends in the evening, telling war stories over a drink or 3. I recall uttering the words, "You know, I have never had a patient develop a fistula." Never say anything like that. The gods have always taken a dim view of hubris, even though they invented it. Of course, shortly thereafter, I performed a Whipple operation on a patient who developed an enterocutaneous fistula, the management of which, over the next many months, likely shortened both his survival time and mine. The patient's wife was a fine woman, but I always felt the sting of her accusatory tone, which caused me shame and grief. I explained that the operation was difficult, and that these things happen sometimes—that this was a potential complication of any major abdominal operation. But I knew what I had done. I had taken a shortcut, and had not done my best that day. I had taken my eye off the ball. The patient suffered the consequences.

The operating room is a place of solace, a place where we are in control. Yet, the operating room can be a lonely and terrifying place. We have the power to heal. We also have the potential to cause harm. We sometimes take big risks to achieve big rewards for our patients. Striking the right balance is not easy. Sometimes, despite the most thoughtful and thorough planning and preparation, we run into an ambush. Anatomy is fickle. Tumors and inflammation do not respect anatomy. And sometimes we realize that we were not quite as thoughtful and careful as we thought we were.

Do not underestimate how much of a toll it takes on you, the surgeon, when your patients have complications. Like great athletes, we need to have the resilience to reset and refocus. I have seen 3 basic approaches to dealing with the morbidity and mortality of surgery: 1. become so aloof and detached from your patients that bad outcomes no longer affect you, 2. allow your frustration and anxiety to make you bitter, cynical, and filled with self-doubt, or 3. shrug it off, learn from your mistakes, refocus, and get back in the game. It is said that more harm is caused by a timid surgeon than a bold one.

But remember, there is a fine line between bold and brazen.

Rafael Nadal is one of the greatest tennis players of all time. Beth and I were fortunate enough to be in attendance when he won his 10th French Open. He has won a couple more since then. Nadal knows how to play tennis as well as anyone who has ever played. He is a fierce competitor and fights to win every single point. His intensity is legendary. His uncle, Toni, is his long-time coach. Even though Rafa has won 19 Grand Slam finals, he still has a coach. All of the players have coaches. A great coach

makes even a great player better. No one rises to their fullest potential if left to their own devices. All of us are fallible and imperfect—subject to self-doubt and self-defeat. Talent, discipline, and hard work are essential, but without proper coaching, rarely lead to success.

I have been fortunate to have had great coaches throughout my career. I will mention only a few, with the understanding that I am deeply appreciative of all those who have helped me along the way. Dr Hiram Polk has been my coach and mentor for the last 30 years. Dr Polk, I hope you can understand how profoundly grateful I am, for everything. Dr J David Richardson has been a great friend and mentor throughout my career, and has helped me in every conceivable way. Dr Richardson, thank you, for everything. Dr Bill Cheadle opened his laboratory and his home to me when I was a resident and has always been especially supportive. Dr Michael Edwards was my big brother in the world of academic surgery and always pushed me to be better. Drs Charles Balch and Raphael Pollock, along with countless others at MD Anderson Cancer Center, turned me into a surgical oncologist. I must also express my gratitude to the many past presidents of the Southern Surgical Association (SSA) who have helped guide and coach me, and who have become lifelong friends and close colleagues.

However, the greatest of all my coaches has been my wife, Beth. In my best times and in my worst, she has always stood by my side and made me a better person. Beth and I immediately were thrust into the role of head coaches when our sons were born; I am afraid Beth has been a better coach than I. Beth, Austin, and Steven, I love you; thank you for allowing me to be who I am and do what I do. Let me introduce Suzy Marino. We acquired her on our team in a trade deal—more about her later.

It is important that the head coach recognizes the contributions of the coaching staff and the players. Those who do all of the real work never get to give presidential addresses. I am profoundly grateful to the outstanding faculty, residents, fellows, and staff at the University of Louisville who make me proud to be part of the Department of Surgery every day. I especially want to thank Ms Pam Schmidt, who did such a magnificent job running the SSA when I was Secretary.

But I want to tell you about another one of my coaches, a man named Frank Miller. Every surgery department has had someone like Frank—the master surgeon whom every resident and attending surgeon calls when they need help. Frank knew the names of everyone in the hospital. He made everyone smile and laugh. He won so many Golden Apple teaching awards that the University of Louisville School of Medicine created a new teaching award named after him. When I found out that there were no rules

precluding me from nominating Frank to win his own award, I did—and he won! When you win your own eponymous teaching award, you are probably a pretty good educator. Periodically, Frank would spend 6 months or a year on medical mission trips in Africa and Asia in very austere conditions. He was a kind, patient, and gentle soul who gave of himself and asked nothing in return. He made everyone around him better.

Frank was taken from us a little too soon—probably to coach the all-star surgery team upstairs. But make no mistake, Frank is still coaching me. I aspire to be a little bit more like him every day—but remember, I have trouble keeping my eye on the ball. In this room are the leaders, and the future leaders, in American surgery. Our success has been the result of great coaching. Our responsibility is to coach others.

So remember, in our personal and professional lives, we are all better with a good coach.

Another of my hobbies outside of work is playing with dogs. We only have 5 dogs: Atticus, Rusty, Fergus, Daisy, and Wilbur. They all have different personalities. Whether I have had a good day or a bad one, they are always excited to see me when I come home. They crave attention and positive reinforcement. More than anything in the world, they love for me to spend time with them in the back yard. They love to cuddle. They love to take naps. They believe there is no problem that cannot be solved by taking a good nap. When they see me packing my suitcase to go out of town, they pout. They miss me terribly when I am gone, but always celebrate my return triumphantly. They are amazingly perceptive and consoling when someone is sick. They are fiercely loyal and protective. The big dogs would take a bullet for me without question (I am not so sure about the 2 little ones). They accept me even when I am unacceptable. They love me even when I do not deserve it.

Dogs may not have the capacity to reason, but they have an amazing capacity to love—boundlessly, unabashedly, and unconditionally. The dogs think that man's capacity to reason is what often makes humans so...unreasonable.

So remember, you can learn a lot from man's best friend.

In addition to tennis and dogs, the other thing I love to do is spend time on our farm. So, please allow me to clumsily switch metaphors yet again. We have a farm located about a 2-hour drive away, mostly on 2-lane country roads, which is just perfectly close enough to home and far enough away from work.

Farming is a lot like surgery. There is a whole lot to learn, and a whole lot that can go wrong. There are a

lot of instruments and implements and equipment, and all of it breaks down when you need it most. There are constant problems to solve and things to fix. The weather almost never cooperates, and if it is not too wet and not too dry and the weeds are kept under control and the endless variety of insects and critters do not destroy your crops, you may have something to show for your labor. You learn to expect that things will break and things will go wrong, and that it does not do any good to get angry or upset. You just accept it, laugh about it, and do what needs to be done to fix the problem. It does not do any good to blame your equipment.

The best results are achieved by meticulous planning, attention to detail, and good old-fashioned hard work. Some things are still best done by hand. It is good to understand the fundamental principles of the old-fashioned, tried-and-true ways of doing things when the latest technology fails. I have an old plow that is probably 75 years old. It does an admirable job when the no-till seed drill breaks down. The time-honored methods are sometimes still necessary, even preferable, in some circumstances. Sometimes you have to plant in soil that is not ideal. Sometimes there is too much rain. Sometimes there is not enough rain. Sometimes there are diseases and infestations that can damage your crops after all the hard work you did to plant them. Sometimes, despite your best intentions, plans, and efforts, you can lose an entire crop, because you cannot control everything.

So remember, it is absolutely true that you have to make hay while the sun shines. It is also absolutely true that sometimes it is just too wet to plow. It is important to learn the difference.

A lot of the farm's acreage is used for growing hay. Whenever we cut hay, I am reminded of a scene from Tolstoy's classic, *Anna Karenina*. The main character, Levin, a wealthy landowner with sympathetic leanings toward his serfs, decides to join them in cutting a hay field. They teach him how to properly swing a scythe, poking a bit of good-natured fun at him as he learns how to perform this menial but demanding task properly. Toiling all day to the point of exhaustion alongside the peasants in the warm autumn sunshine, he achieves a sort of ecstasy as he surrenders himself to the beauty and community and purpose of his work. He loses himself in the simple joy of laboring in the field and forgets all of his worldly problems.

The farmers near me who farm for a living wonder why I would work in the fields all day long, plowing and planting and fertilizing and cultivating and harvesting when I could be relaxing by the pool. They are more than a little bit amused to see a surgeon pick sweet corn

and watermelons in the 95° heat and haul them to the produce auction. They wonder why I would expend the effort to grow fields of soybeans and sunflowers and pumpkins, and even hay, without any clear plan of what to do with all of it. Most of them probably have not read Tolstoy, nor is it likely that they would be persuaded otherwise if they did.

There is a lot of emphasis these days on "wellness" in response to data that demonstrate an alarming rate of burnout among surgeons and residents. We are told to practice yoga and meditation and mindfulness to relieve stress. Now, I am sure these practices are effective among those who learn to use them—it is just that, to be honest, I cannot see that the majority of us will learn to do so. Sometimes it might be just as good to go for a run, or walk your dog, or stare at the stars, or find something that gives you joy and give yourself permission to pursue it. Whether it is in a hammock or a hay field, you must find a place of tranquility where you can unburden and quiet your mind. Who knows, you might even decide to grow corn.

So remember, find your hay field.

Let me introduce Clement Carroll Wethington, Beth's relative and a source of local knowledge and wisdom at the farm. Clement is 82 years old, and spends a good deal of time hunting, fishing, and telling stories. One night recently, his son, Adam, had shot a deer just before dark on a neighbor's farm, and enlisted Clement's help to find this deer and haul it back from a remote area, across the creek, up a large hill, in the pouring rain, in the middle of the pitch black night. What could possibly go wrong?

When I found out about this, Adam and Clement were already gone for a long time and it was getting late. I decided to mount a rescue effort. I jumped in my new farm truck, a 1995 Ford F250 that was purchased at auction from a local fire department. I figured that this was the perfect vehicle for a search and rescue operation. Not knowing exactly where I would find them, I headed down the remote gravel road and promptly got the truck stuck in a very unimposing shallow gully that would not qualify as a true ditch. It was then that I learned that street tires on this truck were insufficient for any off-road purposes. This truck had probably seen more service at the drive-through window of McDonald's than on a dirt road.

I walked about a mile back down the road to find my rescue team: my 79-year-old mother-in-law, Ruth, and neighbor, John, of similar age. We went and got my tractor to pull the truck out of the road, which went uneventfully. We then tried to use the tractor as the rescue vehicle, but

soon realized the hazard of doing so and aborted the mission. While driving the tractor back to the farmhouse in the dark, I very nearly overturned it in a ditch—a real ditch this time. Miraculously, I was able to get the tractor out of the ditch unscathed. Undaunted, we hatched Plan C, which was to use the 4-wheel drive ATV and resume our rescue mission. While we debated the wisdom of this approach, Clement and Adam came rolling down the gravel road in their pickup truck, deer in back, unconcerned. We had envisioned an 82-year-old man injured in the woods and in need of assistance, and were desperate to go find him. Clement told us that he had just sat in the pickup truck and listened to the ballgame on the radio while Adam fetched the deer, and that his only concern was that he had run out of beer.

How many times have you felt like this in the operating room, in the care of patients, or in other aspects of your professional and personal life? Sometimes, despite your best intentions, your desperate attempts to help only make things worse. Sometimes your help wasn't needed at all. Choose your battles wisely. Do not fight battles you cannot win. Do not fight wars on too many fronts. When I am making decisions to intervene in one conflict or another, I often ask myself: "Is this the hill I want to die on?" Sometimes strategic patience is better than bold, decisive action. Sometimes it is better to live to fight another day. It is important to know when to quit. Do not roll your tractor over trying to rescue someone who does not need rescuing at all.

So remember, sometimes the only difference between a hero and a fool is how the story ends.

Despite my best efforts, the weather did not cooperate this year and our pumpkin harvest was disappointing. This got me thinking about pumpkins. If you come to my office, you will see, sitting on the shelf behind my desk, an old can of pumpkin. It has been there my entire career. No one has ever asked me about it. I've never divulged what it is doing there. I am going to tell you now.

When I was a teenager, my family went through some very difficult times. Although we did not always consider ourselves as such, we were poor by any objective criteria. I know it may be difficult to believe that I have ever missed a meal, but sometimes when we came home from school and looked through the refrigerator and the cupboards for something to eat, we would not find anything, except for an ever-present can of pumpkin. Now some of you might say, if life gives you pumpkin, make pumpkin pie. But we never did. The accursed

can of pumpkin just sneered at us to remind us that there wasn't any food in the house.

I keep the can of pumpkin in my office to remind me to be thankful. To remind me of how fortunate I really am—to remind me to be grateful and appreciative. You would think that I shouldn't have to be reminded about this, but it is surprisingly easy to forget. Apparently, I am not the only one who has trouble remembering to be thankful. They created an entire holiday in November for this very purpose—the one where they serve pumpkin pie.

Any success and comfort we enjoy is due to the collective efforts of many. The first step on the path of beneficence is to show appreciation to those around you. Many of you are further along on this path than I. I am still finding my way. Gratefulness breeds kindness, which in turn breeds generosity. It is important to find a way to pay it forward.

So remember, if life gives you pumpkin, be thankful.

One thing I certainly am thankful for is my family. But in life, just as in surgery, sometimes things are unpredictable. Sometimes everything is going just perfectly, right up until the very moment that it is not. We run into unexpected trials and tribulations. It is difficult to comprehend how or why we should be thankful for such hardships.

Our son, Owen, was diagnosed with leukemia at age 11. Up until that point, he had a normal, happy, joyous childhood. During his first year of treatment, there were national shortages of chemotherapy drugs that Owen needed. At one point, we were told that he would not be able to receive methotrexate—an old, cheap, and very effective chemotherapy drug for leukemia. There is no substitute for it. It is essential for the curative treatment of leukemia. The drug companies just do not make any money on it because it is off patent and is a cheap generic drug. Few companies manufacture it, and, like many other such drugs, there are occasionally shortages.

Owen wasn't having any of this. You see, Owen inherited both his mother's brilliance and an equal measure of his father's pure pigheaded persistence and capacity for righteous indignation. He could not accept that he and other children would simply have to miss their treatments because there was no methotrexate available. He decided that we needed to do something about it. So, he went on the offensive. The Make-a-Wish Foundation people came by—you know, the organization that arranges extraordinary experiences for children with

cancer. Owen told them he did not need to meet someone famous or go on a trip to Disney World; his wish was that kids with cancer would always be able to get the treatments they needed and to end these drug shortages. We arranged interviews with local television stations. This led to national coverage and an interview with Fox News, then with Dr Sanjay Gupta on CNN. Owen was so sick from chemotherapy during these interviews that he looked exactly like a kid with cancer should. He insisted on doing the interviews anyway. He told them about the drug shortages and how children were going to die unless this problem got fixed. The next day, magically, there was no more shortage of methotrexate. Someone found 50,000 vials on a shelf somewhere that the FDA allowed to be released. Owen just wanted to do something to help, and he did. There were never any shortages after that. He was a remarkable young man who made a difference.

Like me, Owen loved tennis and our dogs and the farm and his family, and he also loved coming to the SSA meetings. He understood and appreciated the special nature of the SSA. It is a place where we gather to learn and share ideas great and small, to become better surgeons, to celebrate our successes, and learn from our failures. The SSA is a place where surgery, science, skeet shooting, and social events all mix well together. Most of all, however, it is a place for family and friends, for fellowship and celebration of the bond that we all share as surgeons and the families of surgeons. What we as surgeons do on a daily basis is not normal. It is exceptional. In 2015, Owen attended his final meeting, seated right up here at the head table at the banquet.

Owen underwent intensive treatment for over 4 years with nearly every type of chemotherapy drug I had ever heard of and several I had never heard of. When all of this failed, he underwent bone marrow transplantation. During the course of Owen's treatment, I took a lot of time off work. Beth and I spent countless days and nights in a children's hospital taking care of Owen. I had always been the doctor before, I had never been the caregiver, and trust me, there is a lot of care to give for a child with leukemia. There is an intimate exchange between parent and child that is difficult for me to describe or explain. Owen taught me a great deal throughout his battle with cancer. Although it has taken some time, I have learned to be thankful for this time with Owen during his illness. It is the best thing I have ever done.

You see, I have many faults. I am not always kind and generous. I am impatient and easily frustrated. I judge when I should accept. I am more selfish than selfless. I sometimes give presidential addresses pretending to teach lessons that I have not even learned myself. I may not be the best teacher, scientist, surgeon, or person.

But for a while—just a little while—I think I was a pretty good dad. And maybe that is enough.

There is an epilogue to this story. Sometimes the universe tries to partially make amends for its cruelty. Owen's bone marrow donor was a young female college student in California. That is all we were allowed to know at the time. A year later, by mutual consent and after exchange of anonymous letters, we learned that Suzy was Owen's donor. She arranged to come visit us; unfortunately, she arrived on the day of Owen's funeral, so she never actually got to meet him. Probably because she is nearly an identical genetic match for Owen, she immediately fit right in like one of the family, so she decided to move to Louisville and live with us. She worked on the national bone marrow registry for a year and is now finishing law school. She is the sister our boys never had; the daughter we never had. Suzy's real parents do not seem to mind sharing her with us.

So remember: with sadness, there is joy; with tragedy, there are blessings. You just need to remember to look for them.

By analyzing my "hobbies," I have tried to show you how I wander about trying to find greater meaning in common, everyday things. It is not because I do not try to ponder bigger questions and universal truths; I certainly have tried. But no matter how hard I try, no matter how much I read and study, I still cannot figure out why children are allowed to die of cancer. My questions just lead to more questions.

Perhaps without evil, there is no good.

Perhaps without despair, there is no hope.

Perhaps without grief, there is no love.

In my career as well, I have tried to consider big questions and how to make lasting contributions. But I am afraid that at this point I am probably not going to figure out how to cure cancer—and maybe that is OK. I certainly have cured many individual patients of their cancers and tried to help the ones I could not.

The more I have thought about these things, the more I am convinced that truth and meaning and purpose in this life are not derived from chasing big and broad and universal truths. Our contributions, our meaning, our purpose is built one person, one patient at a time. This is one-on-one; this is man-to-man coverage. Every life we touch is an opportunity to make a lasting contribution. Owen taught me that. It is the one universal truth I am certain about.

Thank you for the honor of serving as your President.