

# Presidential Address *Honor, Duty, and Purpose in Surgery*

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## Part I

**T**HANK YOU, DR. MEYER, for that kind introduction. The Southeastern Surgical Congress will certainly be in better hands in the coming year. Ladies and gentlemen, fellows and guests, it has been an extraordinary honor to have served as President of the Southeastern Surgical Congress over the past year. I am truly humbled and appreciative of this honor.

First, and predictably, I must give thanks to the many who are responsible for putting me in a position to serve as your President. Please know that I am profoundly grateful to all of those who have contributed so much to my career. The list is long, and I hesitate to single out individuals at the risk of significant errors of omission. Please forgive me if I fail to appropriately recognize all who have done so much for me.

My career in academic surgery has been, although not unique, at least atypical of most Department Chairs. I have only ever worked in a single institution—the University of Louisville, and I only plan to ever work in the same institution. I hope it is my first and last job. My loyalty to the University of Louisville is inspired by the long history of excellence in surgery at this institution; I am the 16th chairman of this department since 1837. It is also inspired by the tremendous mentorship I have enjoyed during my training and as a faculty member.

When I was a medical student interviewing for residency positions in general surgery, I recognized something special when I visited the University of Louisville. I met Dr. Hiram C. Polk, Jr., former president of this and nearly every other surgical organizations worthy of mention, and quickly realized the opportunity that existed in that institution. I wanted to go play for the best coach, and I knew that Dr. Polk would challenge me to do the most with my meager talents and abilities. Of all the honors that Dr. Polk has received—and he has achieved about all the honors, awards, leadership

positions, knighthoods, and accolades that any surgeon can ever dream of—I believe that what Dr. Polk is most proud of is the impact he has had on the lives and careers of his trainees. Among all of his accomplishments, the greatest has been his contribution as a surgical educator and role model for so many of us. I cannot properly express my gratitude to Dr. Polk for all he has done for me personally and professionally, but to Dr. Polk, and his wife, Susan Galandiuk, MD, I can only say thank you.

I must also recognize Dr. J. David Richardson, also a former president of the Southeastern Surgical Congress (SESC). Dr. Richardson has also achieved everything an academic surgeon could ever hope to achieve—he has been president and leader of innumerable societies and organizations. He is a master surgeon—a true *general* surgeon—boarded in thoracic, vascular, and general surgery and a leading authority on the care of trauma patients. However, Dr. Richardson's greatest gift, like Dr. Polk's, is as an educator. Although his brilliance as a clinical surgeon is unsurpassed, his ability to impart this wisdom to trainees is greater. Dr. Richardson has been instrumental in any small amount of success I may have enjoyed. To Dr. Richardson and his wife, Suzanne, thank you.

There are many other faculty members at the University of Louisville who deserve credit, and I do not have time to do justice to all who have helped me along the way. I performed research as a resident in the laboratory of Dr. William Cheadle, who taught me much about academic surgery and opened many doors for me. He and his wife, Mary, were also extremely kind to me during my training and beyond. Thank you for your kindness and support. Dr. Michael J. Edwards, now chairman of the Department of Surgery at the University of Cincinnati, was my big brother in the world of academic surgery. As a young faculty member, he challenged me to pursue excellence and showed me how to be successful in academic surgery. We were, and still are, partners in many clinical, research, and educational pursuits. He made me better in every way, and I thank him and his wife, Carole, for all that they have done for me. Dr. Frank Miller has been the heart and soul of our general surgery training program for decades and did more than his share to train me. Dr. Neal Garrison has been an academic surgery role

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model to whom I am also indebted. To the rest of the faculty at the University of Louisville—those who trained me, those who have served so admirably for many years, and those whom I have recruited—thank you. Your efforts have allowed us to continue a tradition of excellence of which I am unabashedly proud.

I also must express my sincere appreciation to Drs. Sam and Lolita Weakley, whose incredible generosity and friendship have made such a difference in my career.

I thank those at the University of Louisville whose hard work makes me look good. As all of you are aware, all of the real work is done by others, and I must thank Ms. Pamela Schmidt, Ms. Anne Weimer, Ms. Deborah Krause, Ms. Margaret Abby, Ms. Molly Poole, Ms. Pamela Boone, and Ms. Radi Bombard for their loyalty and exceptional work on behalf of the Department. These ladies, among many others, are responsible for the success of our department. You have my never-ending thanks.

I also owe a debt of gratitude for my mentors at M.D. Anderson, who have done so much to help my career. Dr. Charles Balch has opened so many doors for me and has been so supportive of my career; I have no words to appropriately convey my gratitude. Dr. Raphael Pollock, Dr. Doug Evans, and Dr. Merrick Ross also deserve thanks for their former and ongoing contributions to my career. Dr. Charlie Mabry has been tremendously helpful to me as well; I thank him and his wife, Ruth, for their friendship.

I am also eternally grateful to Bobbie Jo Moore, along with Dr. Ken Sharp, who run the SESC with integrity, efficiency, and dedication; I thank you for your help during this past year.

I must also express my profound thanks to several other members of the SESC for their contributions to my career. Dr. Kirby Bland has been a friend and mentor to me for many years. Thank you so much for your friendship and support. Dr. L. D. Britt has been especially supportive over the years. Dr. Phil Burns, Dr. Bill Wood, Dr. Tim Fabian, and Dr. Ted Copeland have all been exceptional friends and mentors to me over the years. To each of you, and those I have not mentioned, thank you.

I have been blessed with nothing but success and good fortune during my career. However, any success I may have enjoyed is not solely the result of good luck. As an intern at Norton Hospital, I met an intensive care unit nurse who captured my attention and somehow persuaded her, eventually, to marry me. That is the best decision I ever made. So, the best advice I can give to any of you who are not already so committed: marry well. A successful medical malpractice defense attorney who recently started her own law firm, I can assure you that Beth has many more important things to do than be the wife of a surgical chair. However, Beth has

always been at my side and has done everything on earth to help me; she truly deserves the lion's share of any honors that I receive. I do not know how many other spouses of Surgery Department chairs cook dinner for the trauma team *every* Sunday night or provide a helping hand and shoulder to cry on for surgery residents, but Beth does it because she loves to do so. For 18 years, Beth has been my wife, colleague, confidant, and best friend. She is also pretty good with a shotgun. Beth, I love you, and I thank you for everything. Beth, along with our three fine sons, Austin, Steven, and Owen, have sacrificed much because of my career. No man has ever been more fortunate.

## Part II

Now it is time for me to try to sound presidential and teach you something of importance. I am expected to speak eloquently about the profound issues that face the surgeons of our time. There are many important issues that we face today: healthcare reform, reimbursement, workforce shortages, training and educational issues, tort reform, surgeon "burnout," quality and safety, disparities and access to care, the future of research, and so on. However, I will not address *any* of these issues today.

Instead, I will focus on what it means to be a surgeon—the core principles that underlie our profession—and tell you why I do not lose any sleep worrying about the issues I just described. The title of my address is: "Honor, Duty, and Purpose in Surgery." This may sound a bit self-righteous; after all, who am I to comment on such things?

Because I am now middle-aged, I am due for a midlife crisis. Although some in this stage of life seek rejuvenation by buying a fast sports car, engaging in new exhilarating hobbies or pastimes, or other types of activities, I can assure you I am not so bold or interesting. I have an old car, I have no intriguing hobbies or avocations, and I am not so ambitious with my spare time. My life is devoted to the Department of Surgery at the University of Louisville, my faculty, my staff, and my family. My midlife crisis, therefore, is confined to introspection and a search for meaning in the life that I lead. It is indeed presumptuous of me to share my thoughts with the many of you who are undoubtedly more firmly grounded and secure in your moral purpose—inspired by faith, family, and friends. Nonetheless, I sought to learn some lessons that might resonate with this distinguished surgical audience.

Many of us entered the profession of surgery because we understood the exceptional satisfaction that accompanies the ability to heal a patient with our hands. By virtue of our accumulated skill and expertise, we remove, repair, and replace diseased organs and tissues to cure and comfort patients. Many of us are also charged

with training students, residents, and fellows how to do so. Yet, along the way, it is easy to become inured to the suffering of patients, to become cynical and jaded. Many times I sit around the operating room lounge and listen to the conversations of other surgeons. They complain about reimbursement, about malpractice litigation, about how hard they work, and about how often they are perturbed by the trivial aggravations of the day. We talk of Relative Value Units, billings, and collections. Trust me, I often have been among them in these conversations. We spend so much time worrying about the day-to-day issues that we lose site of the meaning and purpose of being a surgeon. Therefore, I started to think about what lessons I might be able to teach you in this Presidential Address. So decided to explore with you the meaning of being a surgeon.

As I already mentioned, I have had excellent mentorship during my training, and one of the lessons of my mentors was the primacy of the doctor-patient relationship: the responsibility of a surgeon to care for his or her patient and the duty of a surgeon to provide such care. Patients trust us and allow us to violate their various body cavities with sharp instruments to treat their surgical ailments. Although this becomes a routine, we must strive to remember the intimate nature of the relationship of a surgeon to a patient.

For inspiration, I turned to the lessons of history, and I began with the father of history, Herodotus, who lived from 484 to 425 BC. Herodotus wrote his *Histories* to understand what was permanent and true behind the seemingly random events of human affairs. Herodotus understood that we are more willing to learn from the mistakes of others than from our own mistakes. I also turned to my friend, Plutarch, who lived from 46 to 120 AD. Plutarch composed his *Lives of the Famous Greeks and Romans* because he believed that the study of such lives makes us better as individuals. So I will begin by telling you a few stories.

#### *Croesus*

Herodotus begins his *Histories* with the story of King Croesus. Croesus was King of Lydia from 560 to 546 BC with his capital at Sardis, which is in modern-day Turkey. Lydia was at that time one of the four great powers in the Middle East, the others being Babylon, Egypt, and Media (modern-day Iran). Croesus was the first to produce gold coins, and future generations would understand the meaning of the saying “rich as Croesus.”

Croesus was visited by Solon, the distinguished “Lawgiver of Athens,” who in his later years traveled to Asia Minor in search of wisdom. Croesus showed Solon around his kingdom to impress him with his enormous wealth and prosperity. Croesus then asked

Solon the famous question: “Who is the happiest man in the world?” Croesus, being a rich, powerful, and arrogant ruler, certainly expected to be on the short list. However, Solon replied: “Tellus the Athenian.” Full of astonishment at what he heard, Croesus demanded sharply, “And why do you consider Tellus the happiest?” Solon replied: “First, because his country was flourishing in his days, and he himself had sons both beautiful and good, and he lived to see children born to each of them, and these children all grew up; and further because, after a life spent in what our people look upon as comfort, his end was unsurpassingly glorious. In a battle between the Athenians and their neighbors, he came to the assistance of his countrymen, routed the foe, and died upon the field most gallantly. The Athenians gave him a public funeral on the spot where he fell, and paid him the highest honors.”

Croesus, offended by this answer, asked who was the second happiest man, expecting that he would at least be considered second. “Cleobis and Biton” Solon answered; “they were from Argos; their fortune was enough for their wants, and they were also endowed with so much bodily strength that they had both won prizes at the Olympic Games. Furthermore, there was a great festival in honor of the goddess Juno, to which their mother needed to be taken in a wagon. Because the oxen did not come home from the field in time to draw the wagon, and fearful of being late, the boys put the yoke on their own necks and drew their mother in the wagon forty-five furlongs to the temple. This deed was witnessed by the whole assembly of worshippers, and then their lives ended in the best possible way. The men of Argos who stood around the wagon praised the vast strength of the youths, and the women praised the mother who was blessed with such a fine pair of sons. The mother, overjoyed at the deed and at the praises it had won, asked the goddess Juno to bestow on her sons the highest blessing which mortals can attain. Her prayer ended, they offered sacrifice and partook of the holy banquet, after which the two boys fell asleep in the temple. They never woke up, but so passed from the earth. The people of Argos, looking on them as among the best of men, created statues of them, which they gave to the shrine at Delphi.”

When Croesus heard that these two had been given second place in the happiness contest, he asked Solon, angrily: “What, stranger of Athens, is my happiness then, considered so utterly negligible by you, that you do not even put me on a level with private men?” Solon answered: “Croesus, I see that you are wonderfully rich, and are the lord of many nations; but with respect to the question you asked me, I have no answer to give, until I hear that your life has ended happily. For assuredly he who possesses great riches is no nearer

happiness than he who has what suffices for his daily needs, unless he is so fortunate that he can continue in the enjoyment of all his good things to the end of life. For many of the wealthiest men have been unfortunate, and many whose means were moderate have had excellent luck. No single human being is complete in every respect—something is always lacking.” Solon’s message was that a truly happy man was one who was financially successful enough to meet his needs, had a good and loving family, was highly regarded and appreciated by others for his integrity and good deeds, and who died, sword in hand, engaged in honorable pursuits.

Croesus dismissed Solon as an overrated fool but soon thereafter had a dream that his favorite son, Atys, would be killed by an iron weapon. Dreams were taken very seriously in those days, so he took every precaution to prevent his son from such an end. His son had been a captain in the army and had aspired to become a general. Instead, Croesus forced his son to settle down and get married so that he would lead a quiet life and forbade him to serve in the military. Croesus had all iron weapons removed from his palace, fearing that one would fall and strike his son. Then, a monstrous wild boar was found to be terrifying the countryside and a hunt was being prepared. His son pleaded with Croesus to go on the hunt, saying: “previously it was thought to be the noblest and most suitable thing for me to serve in battle and hunting parties. Why do you keep me away from such things, when I was never known to be a coward or lacking in spirit? What will everyone think of me? What will my young bride think of me? Either let me go hunt this boar, or tell me why I cannot?”

Croesus told his son of the dream, but the son pleaded with him and convinced him that the dream said he would die of an iron weapon, but the boar had no sword or spear. Maybe if the dream said he would be pierced by a tusk, it would be a different story. So, accepting the son’s logic, Croesus allowed Atys to go on the hunt with a carefully picked group of hunters. Of course, the boar turned and rushed at the son, and when one of the hunters threw his javelin at the boar, it missed and struck the son, killing him on the spot.

Croesus went into mourning for 2 years and then learned of the growing power of the Persian empire, led by King Cyrus, that threatened his country and sought advice from the oracles. These oracles were taken very seriously. He gave extravagant gifts to the oracle at Delphi, including vast quantities of silver, gold, and other riches, and offered 3000 of every kind of sacrificial animal, as if he could bribe the gods to get a favorable answer to his questions. Croesus asked two questions: “Should I make a pre-emptive strike against the Persians?” and “How long will I rule my kingdom?” The oracle’s answer was twofold: if Croesus attacked the

Persians, a mighty empire would be destroyed and that Croesus would remain King of Lydia until a mule sat on the throne of Persia.

Croesus thought this was a good sign. Who ever heard of a mule ruling an empire? While he was making preparations for his attack, a wise man came forward and counseled Croesus against attacking Persia. He said: “Oh, king, you are about to make war against men who wear leather trousers [wearing trousers was considered barbaric], and have all their other garments of leather; who feed not on what they like, but on what they can get from a soil that is sterile and unkind; who do not indulge in wine, but drink water; who possess no figs nor anything else that is good to eat. If, then, you conquer them, what can you get from them, seeing that they have nothing at all? But if they conquer you, consider how much that is precious that you will lose. Once they once get a taste of our pleasant things, they will keep such hold of them that they will never let go.” He basically said that the Persians do not plan to invade us, just leave them alone.

However, Croesus disregarded this advice and started a protracted war with the Persians in which neither side could gain the upper hand. He returned home with his troops to his capital city of Sardis. Then, Cyrus launched a surprise attack on Sardis. On the plain outside of Sardis, the battle started. Cyrus had correctly reasoned that his Persian cavalry, riding on camels, would defeat Croesus’ horseback cavalry because horses have a natural dread of camels and cannot stand the sight or smell of them. So, seeing the camels, Croesus’ war horses turned around and galloped and Croesus’ hopes withered away. After a terrible slaughter, the Persians prevailed, but Cyrus had given the order to capture Croesus alive.

Croesus, in chains, had long conversations with Cyrus and relayed to Cyrus his reason for attacking the Persians—the answers from the oracle. Cyrus then permitted Croesus’ request to send a representative to the oracle to admonish the gods for what had happened and seek some answers. The oracle replied that Croesus had no right to complain; the answers had been accurate. For if he were truly wise, he would have asked *which* mighty empire would be destroyed. Besides, he had misunderstood the last answer about the mule. Cyrus was that mule. For the parents of Cyrus were of different races and different classes—his mother a Median princess and his father a lowly Persian subject.

Throughout the story of Croesus, Herodotus warns us against the Greek concept of *hybris*, of outrageous arrogance. Croesus was an arrogant man; he thought he knew everything. Neither the wisdom of Solon nor the oracles of the gods could save him from destroying his son, himself, and his country. He tried to bribe the gods and was punished for his *hybris*. In the end, he certainly was not the happiest of men.

*Pyrrhus*

Pyrrhus (318 to 272 BC) traced his ancestry to Achilles and was thrust into the time period between the empire of Alexander the Great and the development of the mighty Roman Empire. Pyrrhus grew up in a world in which Alexander's empire was divided into separate kingdoms by his generals, men like Ptolemy, Seleucus, Cassander, and Antigonus. Ptolemy had carved out the rich kingdom of Egypt for himself after Alexander's death. Pyrrhus' father had been king of Epirus, an ancient kingdom in northern Greece that was considered to be a rather barbaric region by the more sophisticated Greeks. Pyrrhus' father was driven from his kingdom and, as a baby, Pyrrhus was transported to the kingdom of Illyria for safety. The Illyrian king raised Pyrrhus as his own son and eventually put him back on the throne of Epirus when he was 12 years old. However, Pyrrhus was again driven from his kingdom at the age of 17 and became a soldier in the army of Demetrius, the son of Antigonus. Pyrrhus was a brave and capable soldier, as good with a sword and spear as any man, and was a charismatic and natural leader. He eventually made his way to the court of Ptolemy in Egypt. Pyrrhus impressed Ptolemy, married his daughter, and with Ptolemy's support, became King of Epirus once again approximately 300 BC.

Pyrrhus could have been content with ruling the kingdom of Epirus, but was ambitious, was never satisfied, and wanted to walk in Alexander's shoes. He began a series of ill-conceived conquests. His goal was to take Macedonia, Italy, Sicily, and Carthage in succession. Pyrrhus was rather treacherous and Machiavellian. He murdered a rival to maintain the throne of Epirus. He then fought against his old ally and brother-in-law Demetrius to successfully gain control of Macedonia. In the battle for Macedonia, the strongest, best warrior captain of Demetrius' army challenged Pyrrhus to fight in hand-to-hand combat. In front of both armies, they fought: Pyrrhus receiving a single wound but wounding his foe twice, once in the thigh and once in the neck, defeating him. However, the bravery of Pyrrhus so inspired his troops that they cut the phalanx of the Macedonians to pieces, pursued those that fled, killed many, and took 5000 prisoners.

In this battle, Pyrrhus gained the respect of the Macedonians for his valor and skill. His bravery, skill, military tactics, and appearance reminded them of Alexander the Great. However, Pyrrhus was eventually driven out of Macedonia, decided that Macedonia was too problematic, and in 281 BC was asked by the city of Tarentum, in southern Italy, to help them fight against the Romans.

He entered Italy with an army consisting of 20,000 infantry, 3,000 cavalry, 2,000 archers, 500 slingers, and

20 war elephants in a bid to subdue the Romans. Elephants were the tanks of ancient warfare, and Pyrrhus always used them to great advantage over the opposing cavalry. As a result of his superior cavalry and his elephants, he defeated the Romans at the Battle of Heraclea in 280 BC. At the end of this battle, 7000 and 4000 of Pyrrhus' troops lay dead, including many of Pyrrhus' best soldiers. Having marched within 37 miles of Rome, he offered the Roman Senate a peace treaty, which they rejected.

Pyrrhus soon thereafter met the Roman army at the bloody Battle of Asculum, where he won another very costly victory. At the end, the Romans had lost 6000 men and Pyrrhus 3500, but the Romans maintained control of the city and broke the back of Pyrrhus' army. Pyrrhus said: "another victory like this and I will be undone." From this the term "Pyrrhic victory" became proverbial for a victory that comes at such a terrible cost that it is little better than defeat.

After winning two crippling victories against the Roman army, Pyrrhus was unable to take Rome and gave up his ambition to conquer Italy. Instead, he set his sights on Sicily, where he had been invited to help the city of Syracuse and others rid themselves of tyrannical rule and drive out the Carthaginians. He entered Sicily with 30,000 infantry, 2,500 cavalry, and 200 ships. He won a series of victories, but became himself such a despot that the leaders of Sicily conspired to have him poisoned. A series of revolts made ruling Sicily untenable. Thus, having conquered Sicily but unable to rule it, Pyrrhus was more than willing to leave to go on to other pursuits.

He planned to return to Italy, and as his army was attempting to set sail, he was cut off by Carthaginian forces. Pyrrhus was wounded in the head in this battle and was moved to the back of the line. This so emboldened the attacking force that Pyrrhus' army was in serious danger of being routed. A large, physically imposing enemy soldier bellowed out for Pyrrhus to show himself if he were still alive. Pyrrhus, in great anger, broke away violently from his guards and, in his fury, covered with blood, made his way through his own men and struck the barbarian on the head with his sword with such a blow that he cut him in two—a true sagittal section. This put a quick end to that particular insurgency.

Pyrrhus returned to Italy with his troops, again to Tarentum, where he immediately fought the Roman army again at the battle of Beneventum. This time, however, the Romans had trained their horses and cavalry to fight against elephants, and Pyrrhus was defeated in battle for the first time.

Leaving Italy, Pyrrhus returned with his army and defeated Antigonus to conquer Macedonia once again. He alienated the Macedonian people by digging up the

graves of the former Macedonian kings to loot their tombs for gold and riches. He then advanced on Sparta, and a bloody and costly battle ensued in which both sides were forced to retire. Unable to take Sparta, Pyrrhus plundered the countryside for awhile and then was asked to go to Argos to assist one of the leaders there to settle a great feud that had been going on. In the street fighting, Pyrrhus was wounded through his breastplate, not seriously, by a lance of a common soldier of Argos. The soldier's mother in the house above, seeing that Pyrrhus was about to turn on her son, picked up a roof tile and threw it down, striking Pyrrhus in the back of the neck, which stunned and blinded him as he fell from his horse. An enemy soldier took advantage of his incapacity and crudely decapitated him, leaving his head to lie on the ground. Thus did Pyrrhus meet his end, in the most inglorious way, slain by a mother with a roof tile.

Pyrrhus could never focus on his goals and bring his vision to fruition. He was considered to be the greatest soldier of his day by Antigonos and later, by Hannibal, to be the greatest of all generals except perhaps for Alexander himself. Thus, Antigonos said that Pyrrhus was like a man who got good throws of the dice and did not know how to use them. He learned that it was much easier to conquer than to rule. Undeniably courageous, bold, strong, charismatic, and a master of military strategy, he won many victories but could not convert them into an empire.

#### *Epictetus*

Epictetus was born in Phrygia (now Turkey), a Greek-speaking province of the Roman empire, approximately 55 AD. He was born a slave, and as a result of abuse by one of his masters was lame; he walked with a limp all of his life. So Epictetus knew a thing or two about sacrifice and suffering. He came to Rome as a slave and served under a powerful freedman (exslave), who allowed Epictetus to study with a Stoic teacher before eventually freeing him. Epictetus traveled to the city of Nicopolis, a city on the road between Rome and Athens in northwest Greece, where he set up his famous school to teach Stoic philosophy. Apart from his teachings, little is known of Epictetus' life. He lived a life of great austerity and simplicity and got married in later life so that he could adopt and care for an orphan child who otherwise would have been left to die.

Stoic philosophy has its roots in the teachings of Socrates. Like his hero, Socrates, Epictetus never wrote a book. His student, Arrian, who later wrote the most valuable history of Alexander the Great, recorded and published Epictetus' teachings in his *Discourses* and an abbreviated *Handbook*.

Epictetus believed that everything happens according to the will of God. The only things that we can control

are our thoughts (that is, our opinions, desires, aversions, and aspirations) and our actions. Everything else is beyond our control. We should accept with noble forbearance and indifference the difficulties and disappointments that life throws our way. We cannot control what other people think of us, and we should not attach undue importance to worldly matters beyond our control. Therefore, we should not worry, whine, and complain about things we cannot control. If you lose your job, it is just a job. It is in the nature of jobs that they are sometimes lost. If you wreck your car, it is just a car. It is in the nature of cars that they sometimes get wrecked. Our bodies are just cleverly molded clay. If we become ill, and even if we die, it is in the nature of human beings that they become ill and die. The Christian *Serenity Prayer* expresses a thoroughly Stoic message: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Epictetus distinguishes between pleasure and happiness. Unlike the Epicureans, Epictetus taught that pleasure is not good in and of itself; it is not the key to happiness. Happiness is synonymous with *virtue*. Virtue is obtained by a life governed by reason that conforms to each man's own essential nature. Central to the Stoic philosophy is the concept of duty. This duty includes both a more cosmopolitan concept of duty to one's fellow man as well as the concept that there is inherent virtue in performing the individual duty that fate has bestowed on us. Therefore, a carpenter's duty is not to make shoes; a shoemaker's duty is not to build houses. Yet each can be virtuous by diligently performing his duty. Epictetus therefore sets out a program for moral progress, which includes controlling our thoughts in accordance with reason and performing our duty. Such duty is virtuous not because it makes others think well of us, but for its own sake. Expressed by Epictetus: "Even as the Sun does not wait for prayers and incantations to rise, but shines forth and is welcomed by all: so you also wait not for clapping of hands and shouts and praise to do your duty; nay, do good of your own accord, and you will be loved like the Sun."

### Part III

So what are we as surgeons to learn from these stories of ancient Greece and Rome?

From Croesus, we learn the lesson of *hybris*. Are we as surgeons ever guilty of *hybris*, of outrageous arrogance? Or even just ordinary arrogance? Certainly, I am guilty of this offense. Yet I see more and more surgeons who become more and more insulated from the care of their patients. Surgeons who must have an entourage of nurse practitioners, physicians' assistants,

fellows, and residents so that they may never again need to dirty their hands by actually touching a patient or the patient's medical record, surgeons who refuse to take emergency room call or who do not want to be bothered by patient phone calls. I see the revolution that has taken place in the field of internal medicine in which hospitalists with no knowledge of the patients provide all of the inpatient care, whereas internists confine their practice to the outpatient office. I have witnessed the cheapening of the doctor-patient relationship and wonder if surgery is headed in the same direction. I recently heard of a physician who was hospitalized after an operation and his surgeon never came to see him in the hospital; only the nurse practitioner made rounds. You have heard similar stories, and I hope none of you practice surgery in this way.

Just a couple of years ago, I was making rounds with my chief resident and we encountered one of my patients who was writhing in agony, abdomen distended, and had not had a bowel movement in several days. Although the residents had ordered a bunch of blood tests and abdominal x-rays, no one had addressed her underlying problem: she was impacted. So, I put on a pair of gloves, and in front of the resident and student manually disimpacted the patient, which brought her immediate relief. On other days, I might have thought such a task beneath me, to be relegated to others. However, on that particular day, it was the most useful thing I did, and I dare say was more satisfying than much of the work that I do these days. Another example: I do not think any patient should suffer having a nasogastric tube in place a minute longer than necessary. So instead of writing an order to remove the nasogastric tube and waiting for several hours for the order to be taken off and the nurse to perform this function, I simply remove it with my own hands—a lesson I learned from Dr. Polk. By doing so, you gain both the immediate and lasting appreciation of the patient. I, like you, am too busy to call every patient about their test results. Patients are understandably anxious to know their results, waiting for days and sometimes weeks to hear from their physicians. Yet it has gotten to the point these days that patients not only are extraordinarily grateful for a personal phone call, but they are incredulous that you actually called them yourself. Apparently this has become a thing of the past. It takes little effort to make a lasting impression. A kind word, a gentle touch, and the fortitude to simply tell the patient the truth about their condition goes a long way toward making you a better surgeon.

As we are called on to deal with the most unspeakable human suffering and misery, we as surgeons sometimes cope with these situations by the use of sarcasm, making callous jokes or remarks about patients. Trust me, I am guilty of this also. If we must rely on such defense

mechanisms, we must at least treat the patients directly with compassion and respect. I believe that ultimately we will be judged by the manner in which we treat the least among us in their time of suffering. The next time you are too busy to spend a few minutes to talk to a patient or return a phone call, the next time you consider yourself too important to accept a patient in transfer or see a patient in consultation with a problem that you think is beneath your stature, remember how well it worked out for Croesus.

Pyrrhus also teaches us a number of enduring lessons. Whether it is correct or not, I have always considered there to be a distinction between achievement and accomplishment. Achievement would include such things as titles, honors, awards, promotions, and recognition. Accomplishment is the product of doing something good or virtuous. Becoming President of the SESC is a great achievement of which I am immodestly proud; whether or not I have accomplished anything to make this organization better I will leave to your judgment. Ideally, achievement follows from accomplishment, but not always. Pyrrhus, for all of his greatness, achieved much but accomplished little. How many of us are like Pyrrhus, so busy achieving one conquest after another in our personal or professional lives that we never accomplish anything of value? For those of you in training, so anxious to rush from medical school, to residency, to fellowship, thinking that these conquests are the only important things in life, remember the lesson of Pyrrhus. He rushed from one conquest to another but learned that it was much easier to conquer than to rule. He was willing to accept costly and meaningless victories instead of making a lasting and meaningful contribution. So, perhaps we can learn from Pyrrhus. However, what is it that we should seek to accomplish?

That is the lesson of Epictetus. Epictetus tells us that happiness is found not in pleasure, but in virtue. Virtue is achieved by performing one's duty in accordance with one's essential nature. We are surgeons; that is our nature. Fate has bestowed on us the duty to be surgeons. Epictetus also teaches us that we can only control our thoughts and our actions. We should not become perturbed and aggravated by the trials and tribulations of our daily lives. We should do our *duty* as surgeons.

I believe that the mark of a surgeon's character is in how he or she deals with his or her complications. Blaming others, hiding from the truth, and making excuses is not virtuous. We should accept with stoic indifference our complications, be forthright and honest about them, and seek not only to correct our errors in an honorable and magnanimous way, but to prevent such complications in the future. Why just a few nights ago, I had a patient who was readmitted from home 2 weeks after a Whipple operation, had been doing fine, and came

in with abdominal pain and free air on CT scan but no signs of abscess or anastomotic leak. I had been working hard, among other things preparing this Presidential Address, was tired, and wanted nothing more than to go home and get some sleep. I examined the patient, he was fairly stable and did not have true peritoneal signs, and I wrote a one-page note justifying my decision to observe him overnight. When I went out to talk to the family, however, I remembered the lessons of Epictetus. My surgical conscience was nagging at me. Just as we develop a conscience as children through the teachings of our parents and others, we develop a surgical conscience through our training. Do your duty was what my conscience said. So I immediately changed my mind, took the patient to the operating room, found an unexpected small bowel obstruction and perforation, and fixed the problem.

Our duty is to provide the best, most compassionate care for our patients. It is also our duty to know our patients: to pay attention to the details of preoperative and postoperative care and to give proper consideration and planning to every patient's care. When you have that nagging feeling that you have not thoroughly prepared for an operation, reviewed the patient's history and medical records, gotten the appropriate tests, or reviewed the x-rays in enough detail, pay attention to the nagging voice of your surgical conscience; it is there for a reason. Do your duty. Epictetus would like that.

For many of us, our duty is also to train residents and students. I have been fortunate to have learned from great teachers with a natural gift as educators. I will never be as good a teacher as Dr. Polk, Dr. Richardson, or Dr. Miller. Yet I must remind myself each day to try to be a better teacher and try to take the time to educate the next generation of surgeons. What could be more important?

#### **Lessons to Be Learned**

In reflecting on my own life, I consider the lessons of Croesus, Pyrrhus, and Epictetus and find myself wanting in many ways. I am frequently guilty of

arrogance. I have not always taken adequate time with patients or their families. I have not always shown appropriate appreciation for those around me who do so much to help me. I have not always chosen my battles well and have not always focused on accomplishing what is truly important. I have not always performed my duty as a surgeon in a virtuous way. I have not been the most patient teacher. I have not borne my trials with stoic indifference. I complain and whine about things over which I have no control. I am easily perturbed. I have the patience of a sinner, not a saint. Frequently, my words and deeds are not kind, generous, and noble.

So what advice do I have for us? We should avoid the arrogance of Croesus. Our lives should not be a series of Pyrrhic victories. In these difficult times with so many challenges that face us as surgeons, there are many things that are beyond our power to control. That does not mean that we should not endeavor to tackle the problems that face surgeons of our time. However, the stoics would say that these issues are of secondary importance. We should *always* focus on the *one* thing we can always control. We should do our duty as surgeons; it is by its very nature virtuous. Happiness and virtue are derived from performing our duty as surgeons. According to Epictetus, we need look no further for meaning and purpose in our lives.

So, in closing, I have a confession to make. Although the ostensible purpose of this Presidential Address was to teach you something, it really was not about you at all. Its real purpose was to teach me something: how to be a better surgeon and a better person.

Remember Solon's advice to Croesus about happiness. Perhaps a truly happy surgeon is one who has adequate resources to meet his or her needs, a loving and happy family, is appreciated by others for his or her integrity and good deeds, and who dies, scalpel in hand, engaged in the honorable execution of his or her duty as a surgeon.

I thank you for the honor of serving as your President.