



# Life, Surgery, and the Philosophy of Dry Creek

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Please indulge me if I take a moment to thank those who helped me along the way. Such tributes are always fraught with errors of omission, but I want to specifically thank several people. At Colgate University, Dr Roger Hoffman, and at Rutgers University, Drs Gordon Macdonald and William Moyle taught me to be a scientist. I went to the University of Louisville to train with Drs Hiram Polk and David Richardson; they taught me to be a surgeon. Drs Bill Cheadle and Michael Edwards were my big brothers in academic surgery. At MD Anderson, Drs Charles Balch, Raphael Pollock, and many others taught me to be a surgical oncologist. Many others, too numerous to mention, deserve recognition; please know that I am deeply appreciative. Any small measure of success I have enjoyed is a result of fact that I have been surrounded by the superb faculty, staff, residents, and fellows at the University of Louisville. I certainly have failed to express my gratitude frequently enough. Finally, to my wife, Beth, my sons Austin and Steven, and the rest of my family, I love you and thank you for allowing me to be who I am and do what I do.

This is going to be a different kind of Presidential Address. Many presidents before me have offered in-depth analysis and insight into the fundamental issues confronting surgeons of their time. I could speak about health care disparities, quality, safety, or payment reform. I could speak about research and advances in surgical science and technology. I could talk about surgical education, surgical history, surgical heroes, or the future of surgery. If you came here to hear about any of these pertinent topics, feel free to leave now—I won't hold it against you. Instead, I will talk about something much more personal, about family and friends and some of the lessons I have encountered throughout the course of my career. I can assure you that if I have learned these lessons at all, most often it has been the hard way.

**Disclosure Information:** Nothing to disclose.

Presented at the Western Surgical Association 125th Scientific Session, Scottsdale, AZ, November 2017.

Received November 29, 2017; Accepted November 29, 2017.

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I grew up in the deep south of New Jersey, in the Pine Barrens, where they bury the bodies. Although the only images of New Jersey that anyone seems to remember are smokestacks and industrial pollution around Newark, I actually grew up in a very small town in an area that would convince you that the nickname, “the Garden State,” is not a misnomer. My grandparents had a small farm just down the road and scratched out a living on it their entire lives. As a boy, I always got up early in the morning (which has served me well in my surgical career) and often would run around in the woods, chasing birds and squirrels and rabbits, making slingshots and bows and arrows, building shelters and preparing to live off the land should the need arise. My poor mother must have thought I had a screw loose when I kept bringing home edible wild plants or when I insisted on trying to make bread out of acorns. I devoured books about Daniel Boone and idolized him and other explorers/pioneers/mountain men like him.

I fell in love with Kentucky as soon as I set foot there. I remember the first time I drove from New Jersey to Kentucky, across the same territory Daniel Boone used to tread, through the lush green countryside. It immediately felt like home. When I was an intern, I met a sassy ICU nurse who treated me with all due condescension and derision. Romantically, we met over a patient with gastrointestinal bleeding amidst the powerful smell of melena, raw and pungent (and fortunately for you, I don't have a slide of that). Within a few years we were married, had a child on the way, and Beth would finish law school just as I would finish residency.

Of course, I got to know Beth's family. She has a really big family. Beth's maiden name is Hendrickson. The Hendricksons are from Casey County, KY. Originally settled in 1779, Casey County is in south central Kentucky, with large rolling hills, though not exactly mountains. If you ask Beth's relatives where they are from, they will always specify the county, as there is no definable town that provides a suitable answer. The post office is in Elk Horn. Mannsville is close by. Liberty is the county seat. The Catholic Church is in Clementsville (this was a Catholic settlement in 1802). If you feel the need for an answer more specific than Casey County, then the answer is “Dry Creek.” Dry Creek is a creek that, in fact, is never completely dry, and Dry Creek Road is about 10 miles

long and runs along the creek. If you need directions, you will learn that Dry Creek is just up the road from Chicken Gizzard Ridge and just down from Button Knob. Yes, really. You have to travel 20 miles or so to reach a traffic light. The Hendricksons, and the larger branch of the family, the Wethingtons, live up and down Dry Creek Rd.

I was first introduced to Casey County nearly 30 years ago and we would visit once or twice per year. Several years ago, Beth and I purchased her grandparent's farm from her mother, as well as her great uncle's farm, and some other land on Dry Creek. This made the trips to Dry Creek more regular. I like to go there whenever I can, and spend a great deal of time outdoors in the woods, hills, and fields. I've learned a lot there. In fact, I would argue that sitting quiet and motionless in a tree stand for hours at a time was the perfect preparation to serve 5 long years at the podium as Recorder of the Western Surgical Association.

Beth's father and uncles and a whole bunch of Hendricksons and Wethingtons grew up on Dry Creek and were educated in the 1-room schoolhouse by Beth's grandmother, Lucille. Notable students were Beth's uncle, the late Fr Fred Hendrickson, who graduated high school at age 14 and earned his PhD in philosophy studying at the Vatican. He taught logic and ethics at Bellarmine University for his entire life, in addition to his duties as a Catholic priest. Charles T Wethington Jr became a history professor and eventually president of the University of Kentucky. Others not as academically accomplished pursued farming and other less noteworthy employment. Although I learned a great deal from the 2 distinguished professors, it is largely from the others that I learned the philosophy of Dry Creek. For those of you who are wondering where this is headed and what this has to do with surgery, let me assure you that I share your concerns. But here goes.

### **Spend more time on the front porch, and visit before the visitation**

In the city, people have decks and patios and privacy fences in back of their houses. On Dry Creek, everyone has a front porch—and they use it. Because everyone pretty much knows all the neighbors, every car, truck, or tractor that goes by is worthy of note, as not all that many pass during the day. When you pass someone driving down the road, you wave—usually with one finger raised from the steering wheel. If you encounter an acquaintance or relative along the way, you most certainly stop and have a conversation—sometimes in the middle of the road. If you stop while people are out on their porch, be prepared to sit down and visit awhile. Be prepared to talk about the weather, the crops, the livestock, the wildlife, the current water level of Dry Creek, and the health and welfare of the neighbors and relatives, among other topics. Be prepared to hear a few stories about

the past and present characters along Dry Creek, and be prepared to pretend that you have not heard these stories before. In short, be prepared to visit.

In the city, people are busy staring at their cell phones. Not only do people not spend time talking to each other in person, they do not even talk to each other on the phone. Everyone sends text messages or uses social media. On Dry Creek, cell phones do not work, so people socialize in person rather than electronically. They still have bonfires and pie suppers and cakewalks and fish fries and church picnics.

Most of us are busy surgeons in big cities. Our lives are fast-paced, our calendars are jam-packed with clinics, operations, meetings, research, teaching, and patient care duties. Our time is precious. We do not have a moment to waste. After all, we are busy surgeons. People will understand if we are abrupt and in a hurry.

Your patients will know if you are in such a hurry that they are treated as an inconvenience. Try to remember that what may be a simple and routine surgical procedure for you is a traumatic and anxiety-producing event for your patient. When you are in the biggest hurry, and have no time to spare, when you have more important things to do and have the urge to dash in and out of the exam room or hospital room without ever letting go of the door handle—take a seat. Visit for a few minutes. Of course, the same principle holds true outside of patient care in our personal and professional lives. People appreciate it when you take a little time to listen to them. You will also find that it is fairly therapeutic to sit back and hear a few fish stories or get a few tips about farming or the best way to cook a turtle. For most of us, visitation is what you do at the funeral home when someone dies. But by then, of course, it is too late.

So remember, spend more time on the front porch and less time on your cell phone, and visit before the visitation.

### **No matter how big your tractor is, you can still get it stuck in the mud**

When I first decided to try my hand at farming, excited and enthusiastic at the prospect of getting out and plowing up a field, the first thing I did was get the tractor thoroughly stuck in the mud. By the end of that experience, I was covered in mud. Everyone gets his tractor stuck in the mud at some point. In fact, it does not matter how big your tractor is, you can still get it stuck in the mud. The corollary to this is: When you are stuck in the mud, quit spinning your wheels—it only makes things worse. On Dry Creek, if someone is stuck in the mud, you drop whatever you are doing and go help pull them out.

As surgeons, we all have gotten our tractors stuck in the mud, both inside and outside of the operating

room. Experience teaches us how to reduce the probability of getting stuck. When someone gets stuck in the operating room mud, we discuss it in our Morbidity and Mortality conferences and provide advice about how to prevent this from happening again so that everyone can learn from it. Nevertheless, we still witness some of our colleagues who seem incapable of avoiding the mud, who think that their tractor is so big it will never get stuck, who blame the tractor for getting stuck, and who always seem to sink up to their axles before asking for advice or help.

Learn to avoid the mud. Learn from others who have gotten their tractors stuck. Call for help and advice before you sink up to your axles, and always be willing to help pull someone else out of the mud.

And remember, no matter how big your tractor is, you can still get it stuck in the mud.

### **Do not take yourself too seriously. No one else does**

People on Dry Creek love the freedom of living in the country, and do not like having a lot of rules. There are 10 commandments. There are 7 deadly sins. It is hard to keep it all straight. On Dry Creek, the Golden Rule is pretty much the only one you need to remember. If you can keep that one in mind, everything else will pretty much fall into place. Folks still look out for their neighbors and help each other when they need it. They raise money to help those in need. They respect their elders and are especially polite to strangers.

Although the people of Dry Creek are as gentle, kind, and warm-hearted as any you will meet, they like to have fun, sometimes at your expense. They enjoy a bit of good-natured teasing, regardless of whether you are a farmer or a house painter or a Department of Surgery chair. It is a regular feature in conversations on the front porch or around a bonfire. For example, you might be reminded about the times you got your tractor stuck in the mud. It is good to be reminded that you are not nearly as important as you think you are, and you do not know half as much as you think you do. It is a good idea to learn to laugh at yourself and enjoy it.

I remember the day I went to the country store, which is about 15 miles away. Realize that in this part of the country, the local store usually also serves as gas station, restaurant, hardware store, pool hall, tanning bed, etc. Perhaps looking a little rough, unshaven and unwashed, I stopped in to purchase some groceries and the clerk asked I was going to pay with food stamps. Feeling a little sheepish about being affluent enough not to own a food stamp debit card, I pulled a few crumpled up bills out of my pocket to pay for my items instead of using my Platinum American Express card. I did not feel too self-

important that day, had a good laugh at myself, and left feeling a little more thankful for what I have.

We have all witnessed excessive pride and ego hamper an otherwise talented surgeon's career. Humility and introspection are the only hedges against arrogance. Spending a little time on the front porch with people who can help teach you that you are not as important as you think you are does not hurt either.

So remember, do not take yourself too seriously. No one else does.

### **Family matters**

On Dry Creek, family is more important than anything else. By nature, every family is at least a little bit dysfunctional. Maybe some of you have perfect families, but I can assure you that most families have black sheep, skeletons in the closet, and a whole host of petty grudges, resentments, and other intrigue.

We are all imperfect. Your family members are the ones who love you despite your imperfections. Let me introduce the late Steven Ray Wethington. Steven Ray lived on Dry Creek all of his life. He spoke in a dialect that was uniquely his own—some admixture of south central Kentucky jargon seasoned by watching too many reruns of *Gunsmoke*. In many ways, he was both the Aristophanes and the Aristotle of Dry Creek—a master of not only the comedy and tragedy of the region, but the philosophy as well. In fact, he may have perfected the art of human imperfection; he lived a hard life and certainly developed his own brand of wisdom by trial and error—mostly error. The beautiful thing about Steven Ray was that he was open and transparent about his faults and imperfections; most of us go to great lengths to hide our own. In the end, his family accepted and loved him for who he was though not always for what he did. When times are tough, your family will be the only people around to help you pick up the pieces. On Dry Creek, there is an uncommon depth of understanding about this.

So remember: Family matters. Mend fences. Build bridges. Accept. Forgive.

### **The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable**

Simple country folk in Casey County may sometimes seem unsophisticated, but they are astute judges of character. In a rural farming community, where a man's word is his bond, and a handshake deal still means something, integrity is highly valued. There is a distinct difference between someone who exaggerates a bit for the sake of embellishing a fish story and someone who is simply full of bull manure. On Dry Creek, folks will know if you are not trustworthy.

If Steven Ray thought that your veracity was in question, he might say that you “lie when the truth sounds better.” He might say that he knew you were lying “because your lips were moving.” If you were uncommonly facile in the art of being habitually untruthful, he might say that you were “slicker than owl [excrement].”

A reputation for integrity must be built over many years, but can be lost in an instant. If you say what you mean and mean what you say, it is easier to keep your story straight. Your colleagues and your patients will know if you are a man or woman of your word. I am regularly astounded at how frequently patients and their families, yearning for someone to tell them the plain truth, have encountered physicians who have made it so elusive.

Surgeons’ characters are revealed in how they deal with their complications. In your heart, you always know if a patient’s complications were related to your own deficiencies of forethought, preparation, planning, judgment, attention to detail, or technical ability/mistakes. Blaming other people for your complications is no more effective a strategy than burying your head in the sand. Your colleagues, the nurses, operating room staff, residents, and others will know the truth. The first step in being honest with others is being honest with yourself. President James Garfield once said, “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.” Accept the fact that a little misery is the price of integrity. Admit your mistakes, learn from them, teach others these lessons, and use them to become a better surgeon.

So remember, the truth will set you free, even if it first makes you miserable.

### **Count your blessings, not your problems**

A sign in front of a church near Casey County recently said, “Count your blessings, not your problems.” This sounds like pretty good advice. We spend so much time and effort enumerating our day-to-day problems—in our hospitals, medical schools, practices, and personal lives—that we forget to count our blessings. It is easy to forget that being a surgeon is still the greatest job in the world.

Burnout is a hot topic in surgery these days. There are many components to burnout, but the fundamental issue is stress-induced loss of satisfaction and fulfillment in one’s work. Having witnessed and counseled surgeons with burnout, I understand that it is a complex problem and I do not mean in any way to trivialize it. I am certain, however, that one contributor to the sense of loss of control and hopelessness is the stress that surgeons impose on themselves. Just as there are fixed costs and variable costs contributing to overhead on the farm, there are fixed

stresses and variable stresses contributing to burnout and lack of satisfaction.

There is a reason that Serenity Prayer is commonly found on needlepoints and framed prints hung on the walls of farmhouses across Casey County.

*“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.”*

The reason it is so popular is that it works. Reflecting on what is and is not within your control brings comfort and serenity to many. Out in the country, you might hear people express their acceptance of the things that are not within their control by prefacing their intended actions with: “If the good Lord’s willing and the creek don’t rise...”

Highly goal-oriented, perfectionist surgeons often impose such a great deal of stress on themselves that they lose track of the things over which they have control. Or, they may delude themselves into thinking that nothing is beyond their control, even as they have lost control over everything. It is not necessary to be the busiest surgeon to be a great surgeon. Some surgeons find it impossible to say “no,” and would rather lament how clinically busy they are than help a junior colleague build a successful practice. Believe it or not, it is possible to say “no” to some of the many professional activities that contaminate your happiness. Ultimately, many of these factors are within your control—where you work, how many new patients you see every week, how much time you schedule for academic or educational pursuits, and whether you schedule vacations or time off with family and friends. It also helps to occasionally recollect why you became a surgeon in the first place, and reflect on what brings you the greatest satisfaction and joy in your work.

So remember, count your blessings, not your problems.

### **The earth laughs in flowers**

When folks from the city hike through the woods, their vision is focused straight ahead; they are intent on reaching their destination. When folks from the country take a walk in the woods, they are constantly looking from side to side, taking notice of the plants and flowers and trees and birds and animal signs. Some day you will realize that the best years of your life were the ones when you were so completely focused on the destination ahead that you failed to fully appreciate the path along the way. How many days have you never noticed whether the sky was cloudy or blue?

The people of Dry Creek do not buy fast cars and fancy houses. They do not borrow too much money to buy things they cannot afford. They do not go skiing in the

Alps or scuba diving in Tahiti or whatever the latest and most fashionable destination may be. They do, however, find joy in simple everyday things that most of us might overlook. Flowers blooming in springtime, the first vegetables from the garden, a field well tended, a job well done, a good dog or 3, the sun as it rises and sets, the moon as it waxes and wanes, the stars that glimpse down on us every night even if we fail to return their gaze.

Surgeons are masters of delayed gratification. We study and train for years and years, always looking for the light at the end of the tunnel. We always think that life will be better when we finally finish medical school or residency or fellowship or get a real job and a nice house and a fast car and can go on luxurious vacations to all of the places that other people post on Facebook and Instagram. Happiness is just around the corner. Once you realize that what lies around the corner is usually just another tunnel, you can slow down and enjoy the journey.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “The Earth laughs in flowers.” Stop and listen once in a while, and make sure they aren’t laughing at you.

### **The days are long, but the years are short**

There is a saying that “the days are long, but the years are short.” This is especially true for surgeons. To be sure, I learned this one the hard way. I did learn early in my career that my family did not care what time I went to work in the morning, but they did care what time I came home in the evening. No one ever dies regretting that they spent too much time with their children.

When you die on Dry Creek, you get buried at St Bernard Catholic Church in Clementsville, KY. It is a few miles down the road. The cemetery is right up on the hill behind the church. After the funeral mass, regardless of the weather, the pallbearers pick up the casket and carry the deceased up the considerable hill to the burial site—despite the protests of the funeral home director that he can drive the hearse up there. I have helped carry my fair share up the hill.

The last person I helped carry up the hill was my son, Owen. As many of you know, he died at age 16 after a long battle with leukemia. Owen loved the farm, and had great memories there. Sometimes I sit there in the sunshine and talk to Owen. Sometimes, on Dry Creek, I hike up the over ridge to where Little Dripping Spring forms a waterfall as it meanders through the hollow, or sit in a tree, or wander up and down the creek as Owen used to love to do. The memories are so intense and vivid that I forget he is gone.

The most important and meaningful thing I have ever done, and will ever do, was spend time with Owen as he

taught us about grace and dignity and what is important in this life, even as his was dwindling. The love between parent and child is the strongest bond in the world and the greatest gift we can ever receive. If you fail to recognize this in time, it will be the greatest regret of your life.

There are no good answers to explain why children are allowed to die of cancer. There are no good explanations for why those most pure and innocent must suffer while those of us so flawed and imperfect remain unscathed. Trust me, I have spent a good amount of time trying to understand. Although the answers to most of my questions remain elusive, I can tell you that the best answers I got were not from studying literature, poetry, philosophy, or theology. The best answers I got came from right here on Dry Creek, in Casey County, KY.

So remember, the days are long but the years are short.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Yet life goes on. The morbid gray and frosty white of winter will surrender to the vivid green, yellow, blues, and purples each year after a baptism of spring rain. The redbuds will bloom, the turkey will gobble, the tree frogs and crickets will sing their evening harmony, the sweet summer hay will need to be cut. The lush green of summer will transform into the blazing yellow, orange, and reds of autumn, the amber brown corn and soybeans will be harvested, and the gray and snow and frost will start all over again. These are things you can count on, year in and year out. Equally predictable and certain, there will always be something pure and perfect about a good surgeon taking good care of his/her patients.

One day, if the good Lord’s willing and the creek don’t rise, others will carry me up to my final resting place on that hill in Casey County. I will be right next to Owen, with Beth on the other side—the same way we slept for many years. Until then, I will continue to try to master the philosophy of Dry Creek, but I am afraid I’m a slow learner. Those of you who know me best will wonder why I profess to teach lessons I have demonstrably failed to learn. The answer is simple: as all of you know, the best way to learn is to teach.

So now you’ve heard it all. A boy from New Jersey teaching you about the down-home wisdom from the land of Daniel Boone in the hills of Kentucky. I wonder what Steven Ray would think about that.

It has been a tremendous honor to serve as President of the Western Surgical Association. Thank you. (Video of this presentation is available at [journalacs.org](http://journalacs.org).)