

Tribute to Claude Organ, Jr, MD

A Mentor Supreme

Edward E. Cornwell III, MD

Dr Claude Organ would frequently punctuate advice he was giving me with this thoroughly unnecessary preface:

The advice I am giving you is the same that I would hope your father would give to my son if he had survived this long and I hadn't,

ignoring that he did not need to justify giving his much appreciated, sage counsel to me or to other surgeons of my generation. Undoubtedly, countless tributes to Dr Organ will highlight his unsurpassed impact on American surgery by enumerating his positions of affluence as chairman of 2 departments of surgery, chairman of the American Board of Surgery, president of the American College of Surgeons, longtime editor of *Archives of Surgery*, and honorary member and liaison to numerous international surgical societies. I would like to highlight the 2 overriding features of Dr Organ's character that made him the supreme mentor to thousands of surgeons over the past 4 decades: his extreme commitment and his exemplary principles and personal integrity.

Dr Organ's commitment to mentoring younger surgeons of all stripes was evident to me from the very beginning of my training. I have countless images in my mind from the past 15 years of him holding court and engaging in fellowship, conversation, and advice at meetings of the largest surgical societies as well as at smaller meetings for organizations such as the Society of Black Academic Surgeons and the Surgical Section of the National Medical Association, organizations that shared his dedication to the mission of a "more complete society"

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through academic and clinical excellence. How well I remember the inaugural meeting of the Society of Black Academic Surgeons hosted in April 1989 by Duke University, Durham, NC, and Dr David Sabis-ton. I had not finished my training in trauma/critical care, but Dr Organ engaged me in a "discussion" (I loosely refer to it as such, but I pretty much just listened) regarding the role of trauma surgeons and surgical intensivists in academic surgery and the extensive use of resources that "you trauma gurus" and our patients would consume. In retrospect, his comments were insightful to the point of clairvoyance, but I was mostly just flattered that he thought I could even understand the questions—let alone the answers. Throughout the ensuing years, his commitment to pushing young mentees to greater heights could be easily taken for granted. With little fanfare, we would routinely see him in small side meeting rooms or on couches in hotel lobbies with small groups of residents or junior faculty, giving formal and informal instruction on the key principles of reviewing an article, of putting together a grant proposal, or of responding to a critique of a recent submission. In April 2005, he flew from Oakland, Calif, to Pittsburgh, Pa, to attend an important retreat of the executive committee of the Society of Black Academic Surgeons, less than 48 hours before giving away his daughter's hand in marriage.

If Dr Organ's commitment was a prerequisite to his excellence as a mentor, it was his personal characteristics that made him unsurpassed in that role, which perhaps best explains his impact on American surgery. It is only through his impeccable integrity and exemplary principles of personal ethics that he could use his inimitable style of instruction, mentoring, and stimulation. He

was witty, charming, possessive of an encyclopedic breadth of knowledge, and extremely quick on his feet. Yet, he could be stern, impatient with mediocrity, intolerant of imprecision to the point of gruffness, and opinionated. I came to believe that Dr Organ intentionally offered up the exhibition of these latter characteristics to hide his soft, sensitive side that I intend to expose with this tribute. He had a wry sense of humor and took mischievous pleasure in the discomfort he could create with some of his time-honored quips, frequently designed to infuse conscience and consciousness into potentially touchy topics such as ethnic and gender diversity in surgery, maintenance of quality in surgical education, resident work hours, and the balancing act of professional and personal responsibilities. His style is reflected in some of his memorable quotes that we have all come to enjoy over the years:

You cannot operate on a differential diagnosis.

There has always been equality in demagoguery.

Humility as a parent is only 1 telephone call away.

You look very well rested!

He would flash that mischievous grin as he would greet me at each meeting with this latter salutation, fully aware that our profession is so overpopulated with workaholics that the comment would not be seen as a compliment, but would produce anxiety in a junior faculty member who, despite being less than 24 hours removed from a 36-hour work day, was left to wonder whether he was indeed working hard enough.

Dr Organ saw Americans of African descent referred to with changing monickers, such as Coloreds, Negroes, Blacks, and African Americans, over his lifetime. Having grown

somewhat weary of the most recent name change, he took mischievous delight in referring to Dr Alexander Walt, one of his predecessors as the president of the American College of Surgeons and a white South African, as an "African American."

Dr Organ had a chemistry professor at Xavier University, New Orleans, La, who would publicly post students' names and examination grades for all to see. The practice did not much concern Dr Organ, as he was always near the top of the class, though he remarked, "I was constantly intrigued by this 1 student that always outscored me—so I married her!"

Given his charisma, stature, and strongly held views and principles, the casual observer might have been taken aback by Dr Organ's amazing generosity with his time and energy with his mentees. The young surgeon first had to demonstrate that he could pass muster, as Dr Organ was intolerant of poor effort, mediocrity, and low standards. I once witnessed Dr Organ at a conference grill a young surgical endocrinologist (a faculty member at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, at the time) with the intensity of an oral board examination on the topics of surgical diseases of the thyroid and parathyroid. The young faculty member handled every question with a brilliance and a respect that made for one of the most exhilarating events I have witnessed at a surgical conference. At the completion of the

question-and-answer session, Dr Organ beamed with pride as though the young faculty member was his own son, and it was clear that this young faculty member had gained a lifetime supporter in Dr Organ.

My most heartfelt sentiments toward Dr Organ were born of a nearly 10-year period in which our responsibilities to the executive committee of the Society of Black Academic Surgeons overlapped. Every assistant I ever had received standing instructions that I was to be reached immediately on the event of Dr Organ calling me. I would always return his call as soon as possible, never quite getting over the fact that he would answer his own telephone. With the completion of our business, he would always take the time to inquire about my wife, son, siblings, mother, and other friends and family members. His true legacy will be carried not only by his amazing wife, Mrs Betty Organ, and 7 phenomenal children whose academic and career résumés are an astonishing tribute to parents practicing what they preach, but also by generations of mentees who will strive for only the highest standards of excellence.

Dr Organ was aware that my wife Maggie and I have an 8-year-old son, Michael, who is our pride and joy and who came to us through the open adoption system in the state of California. While he has been with us since birth, the process became interminably complex and fraught with numerous emotionally wrench-

ing turns. When the process finally became successfully resolved 3½ years after Michael's birth, Dr Organ responded to the announcement by sending him a handwritten note that I would read to him years later, denoting, as only a committed father could, how truly loved this little boy was.

I have come to regard Dr Organ's personal style as one that he used somewhat unsuccessfully to try to conceal what a kind and soft-hearted man he truly was. How ironic it was for me to walk into my office, on Father's Day of all days, to try to clear out some work for a few hours so that I could spend the rest of the day with my family. What a day to receive the e-mail message of Dr Organ's passing. All of American surgery owes a great debt to Mrs Organ and her family for sharing this American treasure with all of us. We will celebrate his life and commemorate his great legacy, but perhaps selfishly I will mourn for myself and my surgical colleagues—because with Dr Organ's passing, the world is a little less bright, a little less witty and perceptive, and a little less kind and gentle.

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Claude H. Organ, Jr, MD

A Son's Tribute

Brian C. Organ, MD

On behalf of my mother Elizabeth and the entire Organ family, I would like to express our deepest appreciation

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and gratitude to *Archives of Surgery* for honoring Dr Claude H. Organ, Jr's, significant contributions to American and international surgery in this November issue.

It is indeed difficult for all of us to be without him. I am sure, how-

ever, that the characteristics and values that made him a good brother, husband, father, and uncle are those that made him a good surgeon, teacher, mentor, colleague, friend, confidant, and counselor for many more.