The Right Thing

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Claude Organ was a massively influential surgeon and American. His tributes are numerous and wide-ranging, each reflecting the unique views of his eulogist and each person’s relationship to Dr Organ. One comment does deserve correction; he has been incorrectly described as having a very strong ego. From my long friendship, I believe he cloaked this ego, if it existed, in the softest velvet glove I can ever imagine.

I choose to stress what I consider to be Dr Organ’s most consistent and compelling characteristic and the personal diplomacy by which he pursued this good: “What is the right thing?” I first came to know Dr Organ well almost 3 decades ago when he and I were representing different surgical organizations with differing points of view about a matter in surgical education. “Interesting, but probably not important; here today, gone tomorrow; possibly a petty problem magnified by the attached egos,” are phrases he often used. Claude pondered whether the subject of debate and disagreement would matter at all in the surgical care of the American public in the long term.

It was then and there that I heard for the first time what would become the backbone of our friendship and his own imprimatur: “What do you think is the right thing?” No matter how great or small, it seemed that Dr Organ’s focus helped everyone to see that uniquely worthy goal. On countless occasions across our friendship, that question and the imperial pause that followed helped me, dozens of other so-called surgical leaders, and hundreds of young surgeons come to a better conclusion, no matter what the subject.

Inevitably, as a product of his place and time, full citizenship for all minorities was often an underlying theme, if not the case in point. Never once did he choose political correctness, but instead he helped his friends move toward a choice that would be “the right thing.” His support for women, overseas surgeons, and others often eclipsed his espousal of concerns for African American individuals everywhere. This was perhaps best said in June 1993 in his work “Toward a More Complete Society.” A secondary theme, often emerging from his lifetime as counselor for minority professionals, was the failure to grasp opportunity and, by doing so, let the opportunity for the greater good for the longer-term slip away. Dr Organ almost never espoused directly opportunities to spread diversity, except that it would be, for the world and our country, the right thing.

Hit the search button (wouldn’t Claude think that was funny coming from me?) and scroll past ambulatory surgery centers; the generation gap in surgery; resident work hours; ethics in surgery; and the nature of civility, a priceless later piece. Dr Organ devoted the lead portion of the ARCHIVES in 1993 to the happy “cohabitation” of surgery and molecular biology and much of his microscopic free time to the development of books that uniquely set in perspective African American surgeons and the 20th century.

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Also enlightening was the choice of other subjects for signed editorials during his distinguished tenure as editor in chief of the ARCHIVES. For instance, he wrote about “Surgical Care for the Uninsured and Underinsured” in May 1991—yes, 14 years ago. How current are his comments on “Fragmentation and Specialization” from the summer of 1987? Machiavelli’s The Prince spun off Claudius’ commentary on “The Future of General Surgery” in February 1990, which in turn led to reprises by he and George Block, MD, in November 1991. If readers are prone to think that these are contemporary issues for surgeons, then they only need to examine these still points in the recent history of surgery to understand the meaning and significance of Dr Organ’s pursuit of and devotion to The Right Thing.

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REFERENCES


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When I returned to the Howard University College of Medicine as a surgical faculty member in 1962 after a 2-year stint in the US Army Medical Corps, Munich, Germany, I attended the annual meeting of the National Medical Association, where I met Claude Organ. Both of us were young surgeons committed to careers in academic surgery. What immediately strengthened the bond between us was that we had Texas roots: both Claude and my father were born in Marshall, Tex. Thus began a valued friendship that enhanced and enriched my life immeasurably. Further, I remain in his debt for the pivotal role he had in my experiences with the American Board of Surgery and American College of Surgeons.

We would meet at major surgical meetings to discuss the state of the union with reference to African American surgeons. Claude often mentioned that the playing field was not yet level, but if we continued to do our part well, it would help us achieve the parity we sought. He insisted that we must be first rate in all our endeavors and could not resort to excuses for lack of achievement.

Endowed with high qualities of mind and spirit, Claude consistently measured up to high standards. Recognized as a leader in surgery both nationally and internationally, he represented the highest standards and ideals of the consummate surgical academician: excellent teacher, superb surgeon, and accomplished clinical researcher. As editor of the ARCHIVES, he elevated it to a position where it was considered by many colleagues to be first among equals of the surgical journals. In his scholarly presentations before various groups, he always emphasized the role of primacy for the patient, stating that we must continue to train safe, competent surgeons to render the best patient care. He was coauthor of A Century of Black Surgeons: The USA Experience, acknowledged as the authoritative work about the role of African American surgeons in all specialties.

Our department’s major educational program at Howard is the annual Charles R. Drew/Burke Syphax lecture. Claude delivered this on 2 occasions, in 1986 when we celebrated the 50th anniversary of our residency program and again in 2004 when he was president of the American College of Surgeons.

He was blessed to have a wonderful life partner with whom he shared his surgical experiences and triumphs. When he spoke of his wife, Betty, the love between them was readily apparent. His children and grandchildren also brought him great joy.