

MY PARANOID SURGICAL MENTOR

By Paul M. Riley MD:FACS

Since I planned to be a missionary surgeon, I thought I should take my surgical training at Cook County Hospital. It was just across the street from my Medical School. There I would have little supervision, work day and night with minimal pay, but see and do so much in a short time. But some retired missionary surgeons told me I was wrong. I needed to train in a Private Hospital under the careful supervision of many experienced surgeons. That way I would learn several techniques and be able to choose what worked the best for me. As a missionary surgeon, I would meet so many conditions not described in any books, but would be able to make the correct decisions because of being trained by so many surgeons. Cook County training would be good for surgeons who were practicing in the States, because anything they were doing wrong would be quickly corrected by their surgeon proctors when they opened their surgical practice. Surgical Meetings at their Hospital would also smooth the rough edges off their Cook County training. But as a missionary I would be a law unto myself. So I chose Butterworth Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan for my Internship and Surgical Residency starting July 1, 1961. Some of the surgeons there had been Medical Missionaries. Working for five years with more than thirty surgeons, I found out that several of them were very unique. I have described a few of them in other documents. But the following surgeon was different from all the others. I found him very fascinating. I even learned that he was a prophet who created his own prophesy!

Dr. "Yussef"(Dr. Y) was very proud of his Lebanese background. His heroes were those of his race, like Danny Thomas, who had made names for themselves. He was even prouder of Dr. Michael DeBakey, who was not only Lebanese, but was also a pioneer in so many areas of Cardiovascular Surgery. Dr. Y dreamed of the day he could meet this hero, watch him doing surgery, learn new surgical techniques, become his personal friend, and become famous like the others.

Dr. Y's main problem was that he was always anticipating bad luck.. In surgery, he felt something would go wrong, then when that would not happen, he would become over confident and with a finishing flourish, he would lacerate the the spleen or another organ. After I saved a spleen he had damaged, he said I brought him good luck, so always wanted me to assist him. I then began to understand him, anticipate his mistakes and keep him out of trouble. I then became his mentor. He began to rely on my advice exclusively! Unexpected surgical problems seemed to arise whenever I was not able to assist him. At the beginning of the surgery I would say: "Why don't we take out the spleen now. It will be easier now than later when you rupture it by mistake." This statement, somehow, was reassuring to him. Instead of

him teaching me, I began teaching him how to stay out of trouble. It seemed that, every time he ignored my advice, he would have trouble!

This doctor's paranoia really plagued him. One night, when I met him in the Emergency Room, he was in a frazzle. He said a young man had just come to his house to pick up his beautiful daughter for a date. He said he knew the man had evil intentions. He could see the evil gleam in his eye! I asked him about his own behavior on a date when he was that man's age, he replied: "That is what worries me, At that age no man would trust me with his daughter, because he saw the same evil gleam in my eye. We had to be under her father's watchful eye at all times."

Another dream the doctor had was to go to the World Series Game and see his favorite team win. Through one of his Lebanese friends he was able to get one of the best seats in the Arena. This was a once in a lifetime experience for him. So he booked the fanciest hotel near the Arena. With others, they hired a limousine to take them to and from the game. He bought expensive flashy clothes to wear to the game. To top it off, he bought a very expensive felt hat. In the final game, he was excited, his team was winning. Finally, his bad luck had changed; so he thought! But in the last inning the opponent's last man went to bat. At that moment, a pigeon flew over and dropped a very large mess on Dr. Y's new hat. It also splattered on his clothes. This distracted him so much that he did not see the other team's winning home run. He returned to the hospital very depressed. Even the birds hated him. He said; "There were over thirty-nine thousand fans at the game. But who did the bird hit? Me, right on my lovely hat!"

This doctor always volunteered to work nights in the Emergency Room during house staff parties. But he did it to steal other doctors' patients. He would refer any patient he saw to his own office for follow up. He would tell them that their regular doctor could no longer see them. So he lost his popularity with the other doctors. He then was sure that they also were against him. Once, while he was covering the ER for a house staff party some of the interns had too much to drink. That day there was a diabetic convention in town. Busloads of diabetic patients were at the Convention Center. One of the interns called Dr. Y, saying there has been a bad accident, two busloads of burnt diabetics would be arriving at the hospital in just a few minutes! Meanwhile, another intern was hiding in the ER and watched Dr. Y becoming completely unglued. Again he was certain that now the whole world was against him. Finally he was told it was a joke.

Dr. C, an internist, was surprised to see his patient on Dr. Y's surgery schedule. The man was a car salesman, who Dr. C had been treating for indigestion brought on by pressures at work. He was responding to medical treatment. Dr. Y had met the man when the doctor was looking at new cars. He saw the man pop a TUMS pill into his mouth, so he convinced the man he need

surgery for a duodenal ulcer. Again, Dr. Y had “stolen” another doctor’s patient, without even talking to the other doctor! The patient did not have an ulcer! The surgery was not indicated! Dr. Y did not seem to realize he was alienating another doctor and therefore losing more surgical referrals, thus fulfilling another of his prophecies!

To thank us for our help, the attending surgeons took up a collection to send the two senior residents to the American College of Surgeons in Atlantic City. Instead of contributing, Dr. Y volunteered to “chaperone” Dr. Rienstra and I to that huge meeting and make sure we behaved. On the plane he told us how looked forward to eating genuine Italian food, enjoying the local “flavor”, and seeing some real City Life. Grand Rapids was too “straight laced” for him. He expected Atlantic City to change his outlook on life and end his string of bad luck.

The first day, at the Surgical Meeting, we attended different sessions, took note and reported what we each had learned when we had supper. But, Dr. Y insisted we go and have genuine Italian food. The first place we entered looked very authentic, but in a huge “bird cage”, hanging from the ceiling, in the middle of the room, was a sparsely clad exotic dancer. We left because our doctor said eating there would detract from him enjoying the food. He then found a more expensive Italian restaurant, where we all ordered spaghetti and meat balls. Dr. Y relished every bite. He kept praising the cook. Then I told him they had served him DEL MONTE spaghetti and meatballs straight from the can. I knew the taste. I used to cook for myself when I was attending medical school. I could buy ten cans of the food for a dollar! Dr. Y became angry and said I was wrong, so we asked the waiter. The waiter went to the kitchen and returned with an empty Del Monte can. He confessed that the genuine food they had cooked had run out, so they had to open the canned food. From then on, all the food in the city tasted bad to Dr. Y, the City streets were dirty, the Board Walk was full of splinters, and even the slot machines were programmed just to take all his money.

After several months and many letters to Dr. DeBakey’s office, in Texas, arrangements were made for Dr. Y to go there and watch Dr. DeBakey doing Surgery. He planned to wait until the time was ripe to tell Dr. DeBakey of his Lebanese Heritage, The first day, he was introduced to Dr. DeBakey who went out of the way to give him surgical tips make him feel welcome.

The second day, Dr. Y took the liberty of changing in Dr. DeBakey’s personal dressing room. That privilege was reserved only for a few world famous friends and was only by special invitation. Again, Dr. DeBakey was very accommodating. Now it was time to really be recognized by De Bakey. So Dr. Y timed it so he would be changing out of his scrub clothes at the same time as the other doctor. As he had hoped, Dr. DeBakey was very friendly and talkative. He had been hearing good things about the Surgical Training Programs in Grand Rapids. He wanted to know more about Dr. Y’s surgical practice. Then Dr. Y said what he

thought would be the Magic words; “Michael, you know I am also Lebanese.” The reaction from Dr. DeBakey was the opposite of what he expected. Dr. DeBakey flew into a rage cursing Dr. Y, then saying: “Why you filthy Arab camel driver. If I knew you were Lebanese I would have banned you from this Hospital. I refuse to teach any of you camel drivers how to do surgery. Who gave you permission to change in my private suite? I will have them fired! Get out of here and do not ever come back.”

Again Dr. Y returned to Grand Rapids and told me about this latest setback. How could he be able to report Racial Discrimination by a fellow countryman? But this experience also reassured him that he was not crazy. Indeed, this was the final proof that everything, including his fellow countrymen were all against him!

When I left Grand Rapids, Dr. Y was a very happy man. He had finally realized, that, as an Eternal Pessimist, he would never be disappointed, and whenever things turned out better than he expected, it would cause him great happiness!

For many years, after I left Grand Rapids, Dr. Y told other surgeons that I was the best surgeon he had ever met.

PS:- Much of this report is based on what I was told by Dr.”Yussef”. I cannot verify events where I was not present. Some of his reports may have been colored by his pessimistic outlook on life. It is hard for me to believe that Dr. DeBakey would discriminate against another surgeon, let alone against his own fellow countryman!

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