

Tom Kirkendall's Eulogy of Walter Murray Kirkendall

Delivered during funeral of Walter M. Kirkendall

July 17, 1991

Saint Michael's Catholic Church

Houston, Texas

A grand and much too rare experience in life is learning from a great teacher. The death of my father, Walter Kirkendall, marks the passing of a magnificent teacher. Walter's teaching brilliance is reflected by the enormous respect for him exhibited by the many students and colleagues whose lives he touched. However, the special teaching genius of Walter was what we learned from him outside the lab and the classroom — the honor, grace, and wit which characterized the manner in which he lived.

In an effort to place the tremendous sense of loss we feel from Walter's death in perspective, I want to examine briefly three elements of his character which were central to Walter Kirkendall's teaching genius.

First, Walter believed that each individual should become as productive a member of society as possible and that each individual should unselfishly dedicate themselves to the improvement of the community. The better good of the community often requires that the individual sacrifice personal desires, and Walter's life, both professionally and personally, was a series of sacrifices which Walter freely made for the good of others.

I stand in awe of Walter's legacy in this regard:

- Ex-students who have gone on to brilliant careers in medicine;
- Esteemed colleagues who valued Walter's wisdom and counsel;
- Patients whose devotion to Walter was matched only by Walter's devotion to them;
- Friends whose lives were enriched by Walter's love of life and of them; and
- A large and diverse family whose members relish the opportunity to pattern their lives after Walter's.

The second special element of Walter's character was his love of competition. Walter Kirkendall loved to compete. Whether he was striving for excellence in medicine, bargaining for the best price for watermelons at the Farmer's Market, negotiating a bet on the first tee of the golf course, or engaging a family member or friend in one of his legendary battles over who had the stronger handshake, Walter Kirkendall absolutely thrived on, and was thrilled by, competition.

But the heat of Walter's competitive fire never overshadowed the purpose he strove to achieve through competition — that is, the promotion of individual improvement and excellence. Walter Kirkendall loved to compete because until the day he died he had an insatiable desire to improve himself and excel in whatever he was doing. And the core of Walter's teaching genius was his uncanny ability to instill and nurture that same desire to improve and excel in his students, his colleagues, his patients, his friends, and his family.

Finally, Walter's high sense of commitment to the community good and his love of competition were balanced perfectly by his marvelous sense of humor. Walter's spirit has been particularly fulfilled over these past several days as his large family has gathered and through the tears of the moment reminisced and laughed at the humor and good nature of Walter Kirkendall. And as one would expect, Walter even had a purpose for his rich sense of humor.

You see, competition and unselfish commitment for the community good often are not easy for us. Humor was Walter's way of softening the hard edge of competition and the pain of individual sacrifice for the good of the community. That is why the humor that Walter Kirkendall enjoyed the most was the humor that was directed at himself. Gentle self-deprecation was a key part of how Walter disarmed the inevitable intimidation that all of us felt from time to time in dealing with a man of his unbendable character and towering stature.

The loss of Walter Kirkendall is profound. All of us have lost a true and valued friend. My wonderful mother, Margaret, has lost a loving husband and her partner of 43 years. My family has lost the quintessential patriarch. The medical community has lost a giant. I personally have lost my father and my best friend.

But let us not dwell on the loss we have suffered by his passing and so keenly feel here today. Rather, let us fulfill Walter's ideals, values, and purpose in life by being grateful for having known him, having loved him, and by living our lives in accordance with the special lessons we learned from him.