

**Dr. James T. Willerson's Eulogy of Walter Murray Kirkendall, M.D.**

**Delivered during the Memorial Service  
for Walter Murray Kirkendall, M.D.**

**July 18, 1991  
University of Texas Medical School  
Houston, Texas**

I first met Walter Kirkendall in the mid, or late 1970's, when he came to the Coronary Care Unit at Parkland Memorial Hospital.

I was taking care of Walter Sterling at the time, a member of the Board of Regents, who had been in Dallas for the Texas-OU football game, and had an infarct, and I had become responsible for his care. But, he was Dr. Kirkendall's long-standing patient. I had talked to Dr. Kirkendall earlier. He had tried to convince me to come to Houston, to be Chairman of Medicine here, maybe two or three years earlier. But, I didn't really get to know him on that occasion. In the interaction, and caring for Mr. Sterling, I did get to know him. Dr. Kirkendall flew to Dallas to see Mr. Sterling. He came back several times, and when Mr. Sterling was discharged from Parkland Hospital, Dr. Kirkendall was there to accompany him back to Houston.

Dr. Kirkendall was not a cardiologist, but I was very impressed. By his compassion, his obvious love and respect for people in a physicians role, his dedication to help a sick person, affluent or not, his availability at any time in the day or night. I don't think it mattered if you called Walter Kirkendall at two in the morning, or noon. He would have been just as present, just as available, and just as friendly.

And the other thing that impressed me about him, in this initial interaction, was his love for medicine, his dedication to medicine. He understood that medicine is a privilege, that those of us who are trained in the science and art of medicine have a wonderful opportunity to give that freely to sick patients. He embodied those principles, and demonstrated them in all that he did.

In my own role as Chairman of Medicine, I come across others. I come across people who retire in their jobs. I come across people who don't want to work very hard, who want to defend an inactivity or lack of contribution, by some excuse that makes absolutely no sense to me. That was not Walter Kirkendall. Well beyond the age of 70, well beyond the time when most would retire, Dr. Kirkendall was here early, and here late.

I had seen him the week before, in American Heart Association meetings, over a long weekend, where he was attempting to help the AHA. And then, throughout the subsequent week here, early and late. Age, retirement dates, and activities meant little to him. What meant a lot to him was compassion, love and respect for people, dedication to help, and a love of medicine. Would it be true that that were in evidence in every one of us?

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I encountered Dr. Kirkendall a second time in concern for patients. It was about six weeks ago. And I happened to go into the Hermann Doctor's dining room. Dr. Kirkendall was there, and he was eating by himself, and he was very upset. I didn't usually join him when I would go there, but on this occasion I did. I thought I would see if I could help. And, he told me privately, of his great concern for a patient that he'd taken care of who had died. He thought he had underestimated the severity of this patient's illness, and had not acted in a way that might have prolonged his life, even though he'd tried.

I've seen this a few times before in others. I've seen it in those who love medicine, are concerned for patients, and take very seriously the responsibilities of caring for them. This then exists after they die, and dominates what one does. I, of course, tried to reassure Dr. Kirkendall, that I was certain that he had done all that he should have done. I had no impact on him. For days after that, I saw him looking the same way. Finally, he came out of that mood. Finally, I think he believed that he had done what he could. But this haunted him for some period of time, even though I could tell he had done nothing wrong, in review of it, and in fact, had done everything right.

But these qualities are the qualities of great physicians. They are the qualities of great people, and Walter Kirkendall was both. If one adds to these qualities, other personal qualities of Walter's — his intellectual curiosity, his intuitive ability to recognize disease abnormalities, and to address them, and teach others about them, almost in an uncanny manner. His constant commitment to do better in the care of patients, which I've emphasized to you — rare among physicians, motivated by other things, God help us. But, not Dr. Kirkendall. His influence on those around him persisted after his absence.

Dr. Frank Abboud called me two days ago, wanted to come join me yesterday, early in the morning to visit and talk about Dr. Kirkendall, and then go to his funeral with me. All of which he did. Dr. Abboud is the former President of the American Heart Association, the current Chairman of the Department of Medicine at Iowa, an outstanding man. And, Dr. Abboud told me that people in Iowa at the Medical School had never felt that Dr. Kirkendall had left. He was still there. What he had given, what he represented, what he continued to give was part of Iowa.

Can you imagine having that impact on an institution, and people years after you've left? Dr. Kirkendall did. How many of us could claim the same thing, ever?

In closing my own comments, I want to share a poem with you, whose author is unknown, but the essence of which captures Dr. Kirkendall's spirit, in my opinion, on this very sad occasion. Perhaps this is what the Higher Power would remind us of, if we had the opportunity to speak:

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*I'll lend you for a little while, a child of mine, he said.  
For you to love while he lives, and mourn when he is dead.  
It may be six or seven years, or seventy-four, or five.  
But will you, 'till I call him back, take care of him for me?  
He'll bring his charms to gladden you, and shall his stay be brief,  
You'll have his lovely memories, his solace for your grief.  
I cannot promise he will stay, as all from Earth return,  
But, there are lessons taught down there, I want this child to learn.  
I've looked the wide world over in my search for teacher, true.  
And from the throngs that crowd life's lanes, I have selected you.  
Now, will you give him all your love, not think the labor vain?  
Nor hate me when I come to call and take him back again?  
I fancied that I heard them say 'Dear Lord, thy will be done.'  
For all the joy this child shall bring, the risk of grief we'll run.  
We'll shower him with tenderness, and love while we may.  
And for the happiness we've known, forever grateful stay.  
And should the Angels call for him much sooner than we'd planned,  
We'll brave the bitter grief that comes and we will understand.*

Thank you.