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MICHAEL E. DEBAKEY, M.D.: THE REAL MAN BEHIND THE GENIUS

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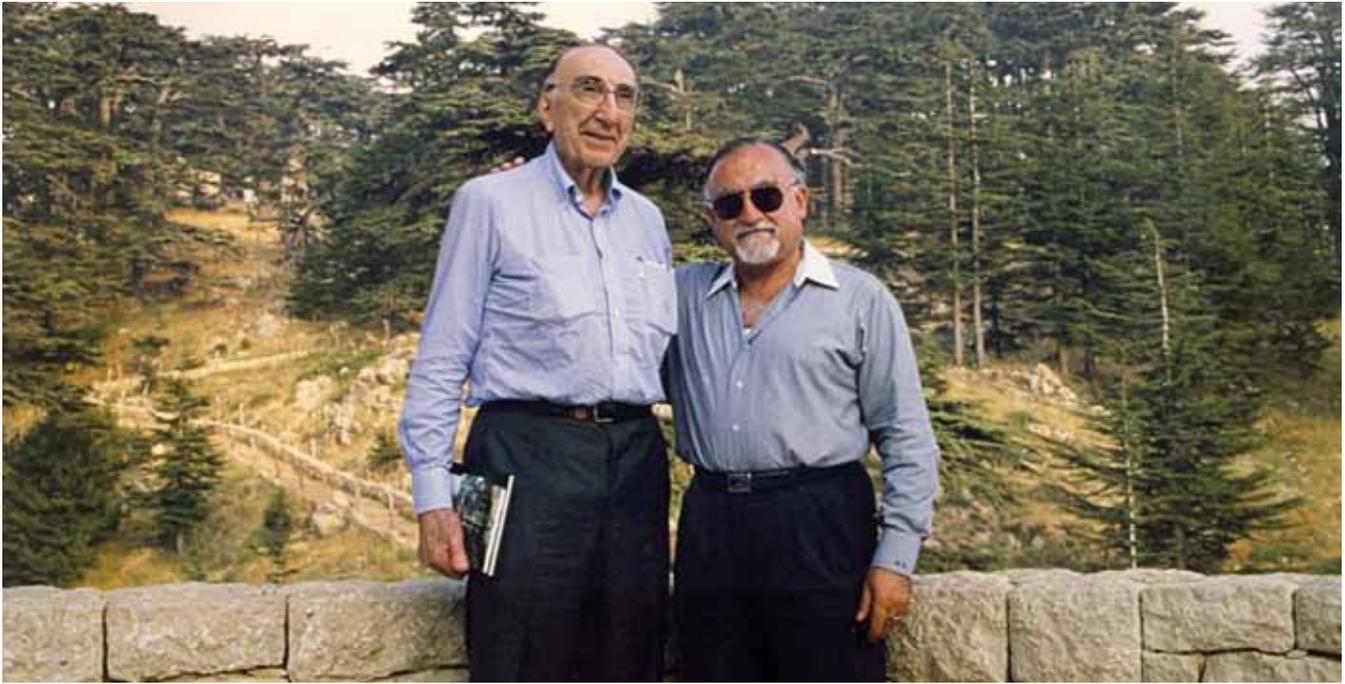
When Michael DeBakey passed away on July 11, 2008, it was a sad day for the world and for mankind, and it was a shock to those of us who had always loved him and admired him, for we considered him immortal. It was difficult to believe that the power of his mind and body could be conquered by disease and death, as for he had always been their conqueror. Since his passing much has been said and written about Michael DeBakey, the foremost heart surgeon, the pioneering researcher, the innovator, the gifted medical educator, the international medical statesman, and, above all, the genius, but little has been said about the man behind the genius. Indeed very few people have had the privilege to know the real man. I feel profoundly privileged to have been one of his close friends and one of who had come to know the essence of man behind the genius. For many years I had the honor of having lunch with him at least biweekly, and I have travelled with him to Lebanon and throughout the world many times. It was not medicine that bonded us, it was Lebanon; our beautiful ancestral country that we both loved so deeply. We were also both reared in the Orthodox Christian faith, and we both adored and revered our parents. Michael DeBakey loved Lebanon, and the Lebanese people reciprocated with affection, pride and admiration. To the Lebanese his name was redolent of a young Lebanese poet Gibran Khalil Gebran who some 100 years ago stood before the towers of New York and said "I'm the descendant of the people who built Damascus, Byblos, Tyre, Sydon, and Antioch, and I am now here in America to build with you and with a will". In an address he made to young Americans of Syrian origin, Gebran said "I believe that even as your fathers came to this land to produce material riches, you are born here to produce riches by intelligence and labor". Michael DeBakey, who himself was the American born son of Lebanese immigrants did, indeed, "build and with a will"; did indeed produce "riches by intelligence and labor"; riches that shaped the future of American medicine and defined the greatness of America. No

American contributed more to modern medicine, and no surgeon is more deserving of the label "Greatest Surgeon of all time". How fortunate to be a contemporary of this man, and what even greater honor to be his friend.

Both Gebran and DeBakey were universal in their messages. The message of Khalil Gebran was the power of love; the message of Michael DeBakey was the power of knowledge. Bertrand Russell, the renowned British philosopher and Nobel Laureate, described the combination of love and knowledge as "the greatest force in the world". It is this combined force, and not physical force, that is needed to save the world and mankind.

Having been raised in a warm and loving Lebanese family, Michael DeBakey had a penchant for Lebanese food, and my office staff, over the years, learned the routine. The Lebanese lunches were served by my staff mainly in his office in the Alkek Tower of the Fondren/Brown Building, and occasionally in my office at St. Luke's Medical Tower. Sometimes we had a few guests, but usually we were alone. The last time we had lunch together was a week before he died. During that time, he said "Philip, I do not have a lot of time, and I have very few close friends like you. Can we make this lunch regularly every week, when you return from Italy?" "With great pleasure, we certainly will" I answered. Seven days later, I heard the shattering news when I was in my hotel in Rome, Italy. I was stunned and I kept switching channels just to confirm that it was indeed, my friend, Michael DeBakey, who had passed away. I was frozen in disbelief for a few hours, immersed in deep thought about the man I loved deeply who was a father figure as well as a treasured friend to me. He is no longer here. There are no more lunches. That great privilege is gone. Somehow, Houston appeared so distant and so empty.

What do I know about this international icon that the world didn't? What was real and what was mythical? There is indeed a myth that surrounds every great man, and almost always the myth is larger than the real man,



but with Michael DeBakey, the reverse was true. The man towered over the myth.

Unlike most doctors who devote their lives entirely to their work and know little of the outside world, Dr. DeBakey had a panoramic mind with an endless landscape of knowledge. His knowledge was far from limited to medicine, but reached into history, politics, philosophy, religion, music, and literature. He was a Renaissance intellectual in the true sense of the word. There was no field or area of knowledge he was not versed in. With the little time he had for nonmedical adventures, he read extensively, and this mind memorized almost everything he read. What an enhancing memory he had, and what an enormous intellect that not only absorbed knowledge, but assimilated, expanded, and refined it. In politics and history, the Middle East was his favorite. We talked endlessly about the plight of Lebanon and the conflict in the Middle East. Although I lived more than half of my life in Lebanon and have always been a political activist in Lebanese and Arabic affairs, I never left his office without learning something new from him. One thing we never discussed at these sessions was medicine.

Although he was a great scientist, he had a strong and profound faith. I have never known of any man who revered more Christianity and its message. He was a strong symbol of love and forgiveness. He never questioned the reality of Jesus Christ, he always admired His example. He was ever thankful to the Lord for granting him that great mind, that great body, that long life, and his unparalleled achievements. He studied

and mastered the human body in all its complexity and wonder, and was puzzled by those who were not in awe of the Creator when faced with the ingenious mechanisms of the human body and mind. He reminded me of the great Arabic Persian, physician and philosopher, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), who said "I studied medicine to understand and appreciate God. Didn't God create man in His image?"

Few people understood the innocence deep in Michael DeBakey's heart. To me that innocence was clearly visible and palpable. When he was comfortable and contented, he always gravitated to talking about the young Michael DeBakey who lived in Lake Charles and, at the age of 10, visited with his parents their hometown of Marjayoun, Lebanon, known at that time as the Paradise of the Middle East. His favorite subject of conversation was his father and mother, and he spoke endlessly and lovingly of them and of their enviable qualities. The father was a highly intelligent and prosperous entrepreneur who indoctrinated in his children the highest human and Christian values and who emphasized the importance of education and diligence. His mother whom everyone called a queen, read the Bible daily and radiated love in the home, and he learned from her the art he applied to sewing Dacron grafts. Both of his parents were extremely charitable, but almost always silently. His favorite food was Lebanese, the food his mother prepared when he was a child, and his favorite dish was kibbee, his parents and siblings favorite as well. More than any other human



being, his mother was the center of his love and life. He repeatedly told me how fortunate he was to have such model Lebanese parents, who cherished family love, high principles and education. He knew that I was listening and heard his words and that I understood. That bond with his parents and with his siblings was what bonded the two of us.

He was not only fortunate to have model parents, but siblings as well. Anyone who knew Dr. Michael DeBakey as well as I do is aware of how devoted to, and proud he was of, his late brother Ernest, a superb thoracic surgeon of Mobile, Alabama. They were extremely close throughout their lives, and called each other often, whether they were at home or traveling. He was also exceptionally close, personally and professionally to his sisters Selma and Lois, both internationally recognized Professors at Baylor College of Medicine, with whom he shared his office suite and who acted as his colleagues/aides, involved in and supporting every aspect of his spectacular career. They were ever present to help him, support him, and advance his efforts. Colleagues around the country told of his unflinching tributes to them for their support of his efforts and for their pioneering contributions in their own discipline. They dedicated their lives to him; he was their world. He respected their intellect and their integrity, which his parents had instilled in all of them, and he considered it a blessing to have not one, but two such treasures, whom he called his “angels,” in whom he confided his innermost thoughts and ideas, and whom

he entrusted his most valuable honors and archives objects. It was a mutually fulfilling and productive triumvirate. Working with their brother cannot be better described than in the apt words of Khalil Gibran: “Work is love made visible.” And: “You give little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.” Michael DeBakey could not have reached the peaks he did without them; they are inarguably a part of his legacy.

The real man was neither harsh nor arrogant, as many people thought. He was very humble and loving. Indeed, this was the only side I ever saw of him. All I saw was love and tenderness, but I can understand the façade of severity and harshness, the product of his total commitment to excellence and his unyielding devotion to his patients. He was certainly a great researcher, innovator, and educator, but beyond any shred of doubt, he was a greater physician. Nothing came before the patient, not his ego, his name, his prestige, or his interests. He was invariably intolerant of mediocrity and could never accept anything less than the best. When it came to the patient’s life, niceties did not count, and he always cut through to the heart of the matter. He was the strongest patient’s advocate, and he never compromised on their lives. That was what made him the great doctor he was.

He exuded confidence, but he was indeed humble. He was a man of integrity — solid integrity. In an era when we witness the assault of bureaucracy, government, and insurance companies on the quality of medical care and on the very essence of the humanitarianism of medicine, none had the courage to challenge those forces more than Michael DeBakey. Of all the “products” of America, the very best in my opinion has been American medicine. Dr. DeBakey was instrumental not only in making this excellent product, but also in preserving its sanctity. In this era of materialism, mechanization, and decline in human values, Michael DeBakey stood as a monument of character, integrity, courage, and above all, humaneness. Despite his giant stature; however, this man was in constant awe of new and expanded knowledge, of the wonder and complexity of the human body, and above all the Creator.

With his death, a part of me has also died. I will miss the lunches, I will miss the dialogues, I will miss the endless hours talking about Lebanon and our parents, I will miss our pure and mutual friendship, I will miss his love and tenderness. I will always miss him deeply. My only solace is that part of him is still alive and still with us. That part is in Selma and Lois. Every time I hug them, I feel he has not died.

May the Lord bless him in heaven, as He blessed him on earth.