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## THE ELDERS

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### “Miss not the discourse of the Elders” *Apocrypha Ecclesiasticus VIII:9*

I am an elder, at least so by age. So you know my bias from the start. I have thought a lot about elders in recent weeks since reading an op-ed column by Peggy Noonan, a political analyst and columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, on the elders of the news reporting profession. She eulogized the likes of Walter Cronkite, William Safire, and Tim Russert and emphasized how their careers set standards for the rest of the profession. It was a very touching essay and made me realize how much we owe the elders in our own profession.

So I googled the origin of the term “The Elders” and found a global organization of the same name. “The Elders” was established in 2007 by a group of global leaders, led initially by Nelson Mandela, to “help resolve global problems and ease human suffering.” Perhaps this group was energized by the story of Pliny the Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus, A.D. 23-79) who tried in vain to rescue a friend and his family from the destruction wrought by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Their mission stated, “The Elders can speak freely and boldly, working both publicly and behind

the scenes. They will reach out to those who most need help. They will support courage where there is fear, foster agreement where there is conflict, and inspire hope where there is despair.”<sup>1</sup>

About the same time, I had occasion to visit a former medical school roommate in Watsonville, California. He and his charming wife escorted me and my wife to visit a segment of the remaining redwood forest of California. There, we encountered serious elders of the redwood genus (Figure 1), some exceeding a thousand years old. Two months later, while attending the first echocardiography conference held in Beirut, Lebanon (Figure 2), I found myself in the company of the relatively few surviving Cedars of Lebanon, some of equal age as the redwoods or older. I even planted a cedar stripling, hoping that one day it will become a “cedar elder” and help repopulate a forest of that magnificent tree.

By extension, it is clear that elders come in many different packages in nature and in all walks of our lives. Redwood and cedars, if left alone, will see to it that new sprouts will come along. For us humans, there are those creative, innovative elders who have improved



Figure 1. Redwood tree in the redwood forest in California



Figure 2. One of the Cedars of Lebanon in Beirut

the health of our population, particularly in the field of cardiovascular disease. Names like Laennec, Roentgen, Einthoven, Cournand, Sones, Edler, and DeBakey are among the best known because they affected change that influenced the course of subsequent events and emboldened new areas of scientific endeavor. They are the famous.

But there are elders who are not necessarily creative, innovative, or even famous, who instead are influential at every level of our society. They may be role models, mentors, or your next-door neighbor. They may serve their profession as politicians, administrators, scientists, teachers, as well as physicians. Some may assume multiple roles. Elders are influential in the lives of others, particularly the young. How often does one hear from a student going into medical school that it was a physician who influenced his/her decision, or a physician to whom a person was beholden for a lifesaving service? Physician-families are common: father, son, grandson. My deceased senior partner, Don W. Chapman, was an example. Every Chapman male since the Civil War became a physician. I believe it was 14 at last count — among them his son, who still practices in Dallas.

Elders provide the fabric for the weaving of a profession. The strength of that fabric determines the character of that profession. That fabric may stretch or bend in one direction or another depending on external or internal influences, but it is the elders who keep it from breaking and add new strands to strengthen it over the years, much like the redwoods and the cedars. The medical profession in general, and the cardiovascular specialty in particular, have been the beneficiaries of the brightest and most dedicated to preserving our fabric.

During the last 15 years, as an invited guest of the Board of Trustees of the American College of Cardiology by virtue of being a past president, I watched in awe as modern elders emerged in cardiovascular medicine. The entire board has changed hands several times during that period. Cardiology has grown from a single specialty to multiple subspecialties, each with its own certification board. Cardiovascular surgery is on the same path. Board meetings remain thoughtful, decisive, and sometimes contentious, but in the end there is always consensus. And then they move on. Elders play a crucial role in this ever-changing and increasingly complex scene.

All physicians will become elders one day — respected perhaps in their families or community or among practitioners or academicians. Some will be more influential and more memorable than others. I remember an elder in every stage of my life commenc-

ing in high school. Some are more memorable than others because of some significant role they played in the development of my character and career. Elders are not the only important influences in a person's life, but they tend to stand out. My father, a physician, was the earliest elder I remember: he taught me the value of dignity and the rewards of hard work, integrity, and honesty. Solly Thurston, my high school Latin teacher, taught me to persist when I was inclined to give it up. Dr. Mark Wheelock, a pathologist at Northwestern Medical School, for whom I worked nights and weekends doing autopsies as a medical student to earn my room and board, provoked me to be precise in my reports. Dr. Thomas Durant, a superb clinician and a remote past president of the American College of Physicians, tried to make a doctor of me as an intern by illustrating over and over the value of a thorough physical examination. Dr. Louis Soloff, a pathologist turned cardiologist, made me believe in myself and trust my judgment. Dr. Jacob Zatuchni cajoled me to understand each patient as an individual and not just another "interesting case."

When I moved to Houston, Drs. Don W. Chapman and H. Liston Beazley extended courtesy and friendship that cemented our relationship as nothing else could have. More recently, the most remarkable elder I'll ever know, Dr. Michael E. DeBakey, showed us all the breadth of a brilliant mind — a steadfast determination to improve the lot of the ill whether an individual or our society as a whole, in civilian or military arenas. His demand for excellence ruffled many, but the final result was extraordinary. Most recently, his two sisters, Professors Selma and Lois DeBakey, as well-known in the field of medical literary and critical reasonings as their brother was in cardiovascular surgery, have diligently tutored me into becoming an editor since this journal was established five years ago.

The realization that our elders play a real role in our lives and profession takes time to develop. Recognition of this contribution too often comes after our elders have left the scene. And only then are the epitaphs and eulogies written. I vote for a National Elders Day to honor elders of all variety. Although their place in the sun is all too short, the symbolism of our elders is pervasive and long-lasting.

Hail to the Elders!

## References

1. The Elders [Internet]. London, United Kingdom: The Elders Foundation; ©2007-2009. About the Elders; 2007 Jul [cited 2009 Jan 7]. Available from: <http://www.theelders.org/elders>