

“To Jerry Garcia”

For these past many months I've tried to reflect the concerns and the issues that are facing us as physicians in our city and state. Autumn is upon us; the moderation in our desert climate, a return of children to school and, the approaching onslaught of snowbirds bring us back to harsh realities. Vacations drift into the shimmering mirages of this summer's record heat. It's business as usual.

I think this is a good opportunity to look with introspection at the “glass half empty or half full” scenario of our collective lives as doctors. All of us chose this profession ideally for the opportunity to serve our fellow human in time of sickness and suffering. I certainly would like to feel that this was our motivation; it certainly was mine. I hope you'll pardon my autobiographical look at what it takes to be “the doctor.”

As a mediocre student at a “nationally recognized” college preparatory high school in Cincinnati I had but one choice for college. My academic record and family finances dictated that I enter Ohio State University in 1968. I was always headed for a life of service and, in a generation first exposed to television, I saw as my mission to emulate the protector of the innocent; I was to be the next Perry Mason (the shrewd defense attorney played by Raymond Burr on my black and white TV screen). That commitment was interrupted by two events in my young adulthood.

During the summer of my freshman year I had the opportunity to work for the Hamilton County sheriff as a clerk in the criminal court division. It was in this setting that I observed the dirty underworld of criminal justice. I learned the term “plea bargain” (which even today seems somehow oxymoronic). I could not comprehend in my idealistic fervor for justice, that a crime for which the punishment seemed still insufficient, could be called by another name and receive a lesser degree of correction even after the admission of guilt. I became skeptical that the pursuit of my legal career would correspond to the sense of right and wrong I cherished as a naïve youth.

The second event of my young life that helped me chart a different course was the Vietnam War and the harsh reality of “draft lottery number 94.” With that distinction it seemed to me unlikely I would survive long enough to get to law school based on the progress of that conflict. Certainly truth, justice and, the “American way” was not my perception of service in Southeast Asia (especially residing 60 miles from Kent State)! While my love of literature made me hold fast to my major course of study in the English department (where I now had honor student status), my love of life pointed me squarely towards the “2-M deferment” from the military draft that medical school would afford. The rest as it is said, “is history.”

During my medical education I married and my wife held a series of odd jobs to keep us afloat financially. When I received my medical license and began residency I held two or three jobs myself. In addition to over 100 hours each week as an intern and resident I worked on the “blood mobile.” I supervised blood banking in the community on a converted bus. I worked several shifts in rural southern Ohio emergency rooms including a memorable double shift when a tornado leveled the town of Xenia and, the Green County Hospital where I was the only physician in attendance, presented the bastion of care for that hamlet's citizens.

After four years of medical school and five years of residency I finally found myself stepping on to the burning asphalt of Phoenix in July 1981 as my car broke down after the two-day drive from Ohio. During that time my fraternity brothers from Ohio State embarked upon careers with Procter and Gamble, took over the family business and, in one case a high school friend (the first person I ever knew that got busted for smoking pot) became a state's attorney general! I was however, thrilled to be the master of my own destiny. I was a professional, one to whom the public would turn with trust to ease their pain, help them to walk again and, correct the deformities and traumatic afflictions of their children. There was no thought of litigation or "defensive medicine." The term "managed care" held no meaning for me. I didn't know how or to whom to send a bill for my services. I was happy to be finally free to serve my fellow man with the hard-earned knowledge I had acquired.

It has now been almost a quarter of a century of service to my community. Next year I will attend my thirty-year medical school reunion. I still feel that the path I chose is one of righteousness, integrity and, compassion. My professional career is second only to watching my children grow to adulthood. The simple joy of a job well done, a patient's thanks, an X-ray you can't wait to show your colleague is the fabric that binds my existence.

If I have achieved financial success it pales in comparison to a high school student drafted by the NBA or a baseball slugger whose accomplishments were manufactured in a laboratory. My early role models who taught me the term "plea bargain" now question *my* integrity and honesty. I know now to whom the bill for my service should be sent. It is ironic I must accept a discount which is "negotiated" or I'll not be paid at all. The public I sought to serve from my naïve childhood musings through years of hard work and sleep deprivation equates me with a used car salesman with respect to my veracity. The federal government spends more to prevent me from defrauding those I serve than was expended one year in Vietnam.

One thing I did learn from the turbulent seventies at Ohio State and neighboring Kent State is that defiance and activism can be a powerful tool in our society. I still work three or more jobs. It is midnight as I complete this essay as your president. I will awaken at 5 AM to begin my day in surgery (I'll still be late). I'll volunteer for another ARMA committee and I serve as president of the state orthopedic society. I encourage you to recall what your personal journey to join this profession has been and to cherish your accomplishment. To preserve that legacy today you must be an activist, a radical if necessity demands it. In the words of one of the other mentors of my youth, "what a long strange trip it's been." Keep truckin'.

See you next month,

Marc J. Rosen, M.D.
President