



Letter from Dr. Ernest J. Gentchos



I am humbled to be honored by the *University of Pennsylvania Orthopaedic Journal*. Heaven knows that I don't deserve it. Honors are reserved to celebrate recognition and accomplishments.

I am not JJ Thomson, the third Director of the Cavendish Laboratory in Physics at Cambridge University, England. He discovered the electron. This was the first fundamental nuclear particle. The

atom no longer stood whole and alone. For this he received a Nobel Prize. The laboratory went on to attract English as well as foreign students, who demonstrated enthusiasm, curiosity, and open-mindedness. Seven of his students, along with his son, went on to each receive the Nobel Prize, and 27 of his students were accepted to the Royal Society of England, a testament to a great teacher and mentor.

There are also other kinds of awards. They honor philanthropic donors, who are noble and should be honored. Some donors, however, come top heavy with strings attached. They come with hidden agendas. They are the kind that seek access to the corridors of power, influence, and privilege. We have seen and know them: the kind that compromise great institutions as well as individual physicians. They are the kind that seduce us. Where have the legal system, insurance industry, and government taken us? Did I forget to mention we are no longer doctors but only providers? What would Dr. Edgar Ralston say? What would Dr. Jonathan Rhoads say?

Like many doctors from my era, my summers throughout high school and college were spent in community hospitals working as orderlies. Beginning in the emergency room, I then went on to the pathology department. I learned a great deal of anatomy and pathology by assisting in autopsies.

Finally I worked up to surgical assistant in the OR. The surgical staff recognized that I wanted to be a doctor. They became my teachers. I was seventeen years old when I did my first appendectomy, of course under supervision.

In the early 1950s, there was no heart-lung machine. Open surgery for congenital heart disease in children was performed under hypothermia. I was the junior member of the hypothermia team. This presented a great opportunity for me to meet the prominent cardiac surgeons. They were good and fast. This team of cardiac surgeons, headed by Dr. Charles Bailey, made the cover of *Time* magazine in the 1950s. I will always be grateful to the staff of our community hospital for all that they taught me.

I applied to medical school during my second year of college. I was accepted during my third year. I attended St. Louis University School of Medicine in St. Louis, MO. During my second year of medical school, I was plagued with bouts of recurrent bowel obstruction and periodic bleeding. On

numerous occasions, I was considered a candidate for a large bowel resection. I have generalized diverticulosis of the colon. The chairman of the GI service was opposed to a partial or total colectomy since the exact site of the bleeding could never be determined at that time. In 2007, I had massive GI bleeding requiring transfusion of eight units of blood. Bleeding spontaneously stopped - no surgery performed.

After finishing medical school and internship, I served in the United States Army for two years. I was stationed at Fort Campbell, KY, with the 101st Airborne Division. The 101st Airborne Division is on alert 24 hours a day, ready for worldwide deployment. The paratroopers from this division can jump from less than 1200 feet with accuracy to the drop zone. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the mission of the 101st was to capture Havana Airport. All members of the 101st Airborne Division were expected to jump, including the doctors. Fortunately, war was averted. Thank God, as the casualty rate was expected to be 30-40% in such an operation.

My second posting was to Fort Benning, in Columbus, GA, the home of the 2nd Infantry Division. Martin Army Hospital at Fort Benning has a large orthopaedic service. In addition to being the site of the paratrooper jump school, Fort Benning was also the training area for the helicopter pilots and crew who were to form the new First Air Cavalry Division. These groups provided a wealth of orthopaedic injuries. Our civilian consultant was Dr. Jack Hughston of Columbus, GA, a premier orthopaedic surgeon. The 15th Medical Battalion was formed in support of the First Air Cavalry Division, and off we were to Vietnam, where I spent 13 months.

Upon my return, I met with Dr. William S. Blakemore at Penn. He advised me to attend the postgraduate school of surgery of the University of Pennsylvania for one year and then enter surgical residency as a second year with him. The postgraduate school of surgery was a magnificent year of education. There was yearlong surgical anatomy taught by Dr. Michael Hardy, a renowned orthopaedic anatomist, and physiology taught by the Department of Physiology. The year also included classical surgical procedures performed on dogs. Follow-up care was given to our canine patients, and the dogs were expected to recover. We also observed surgery by Penn physicians at HUP and Pennsylvania Hospital.

At the conclusion of this year, having passed the written exam, I entered second year surgical residency with Dr. Blakemore. At the completion of my second year of surgical residency, my interest returned to orthopaedics. When I met with Dr. Blakemore and expressed my interest in orthopaedics, he immediately, in my presence, phoned Dr. Edgar Ralston and told him he had a young man for his program. Dr. Ralston replied, "Send him over." During my final two years of orthopaedic residency, I served as Chief Resident. In 1985, I took a fellowship in Spine at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, MA, a Harvard University program, with Dr. Gus White.

If we are lucky in our school years and are blessed with at least one teacher who becomes our true mentor, the path of our lives is influenced and defined with inspiration and dignity in a way we have not imagined. During my career, I have been fortunate to benefit from several outstanding teachers and mentors. Dr. Blakemore was a very intimidating person. His Saturday morning Grand Rounds were legendary and lasted for hours. Each patient in the ward was seen, his history was presented, and any complication was discussed in an open forum.

Dr. Ralston, the Chairman of the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, was a deep thinker, highly intelligent, a gentleman with great integrity. He hardly ever gave a lecture. In fact, I don't remember even one. He never called attention to himself, but you knew you were in the presence of a great man. He led by example. As Chief Administrative Resident for two years, I had the privilege of working closely with him. He had a very kind heart. He left it to me to deal with problems.

Dr. Zachary Friedenberg was truly a genius. He was extremely disciplined, well-read, and athletic. His surgeries were slow but technically superior. I spent every day with him for six months during my senior rotation. I miss him so.

Dr. Marvin Steinberg is a man for whom I have the greatest admiration. He has been a friend, fellow physician, and mentor. He has a heart of gold. Our discussions to this day are legendary, especially when we have opposite views.

Dr. Richard Lackman will always be remembered for saving

our residency program. His commitment to education can never be forgotten.

To quote Shakespeare, "Some are thrust into greatness." Dr. Scott Levin has a lot on his plate. He has been called to lead this historic University of Pennsylvania Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, the first in the nation. Our residency program is second to none, attracting the best and brightest. Our young faculty shows great promise. The research program under Dr. Lou Soslowsky is outstanding. The new orthopaedic institute is about to become a reality. We proudly support and salute the accomplishments of Dr. Levin. He is our General George Patton. He will get the job done.

With tremendous support and the generosity of many of my patients as well as our family and friends, I have established endowed scholarships in support of medical, college, and high school students. These include scholarships at two medical schools, two colleges, and two high schools as well as one endowed medical lectureship.

These endowed scholarships are more than just financial. They demonstrate our significant commitment to education. By this, we hope that the students who receive these scholarships will be motivated to succeed and consider future generations of students.

My life has had value not only to my family but also to others whom I had the opportunity to help. If you ask what my personal philosophy is, I would answer, *What you do for others matters most.* That is how I live my life..