

Passing the torch



Mark Murphy, M.D.

I suppose I had always imagined him having sprung, fully-formed by God himself, from the red clay earth of the north Georgia hills – a latter-day Adam, his thick, calloused fingers intact, capable of deft bits of magical dexterity that defied even the most strenuous of skeptics.

The dingy black and white photographs I shuffle through today tell a different story. He was born 82 years ago in a ramshackle Jackson County farmhouse with no running water or electricity. The house is long gone now, reclaimed by the tangled roots and twisted vines of the rugged land from whence it came. Only the outline of its foundation, formed from creek-smoothed rocks laid out over a century ago by a pair of long-dead hands, remains.

My father was the oldest of four children born to a simple mountain man and his country bride. My grandfather, uneducated, struggled to make ends meet in the wake of the Great Depression. He eventually left the family homestead and moved to Macon for a fresh start. They had barely settled into their new home in Bibb County when it went up in flames, their meager possessions spiraling into the sky on a bitter plume of smoke and ash. The castoff clothes and food donations given to the poor family shamed them. They didn't want handouts. They wanted an opportunity.

A spark ignited in my father somewhere. He nurtured it quietly at first, cupping his hands around it and stoking it carefully. I was never certain whether that spark originated in the wake of that devastating house fire or someplace more vital, but its effect was clear: Jack Murphy was determined to make something of himself. Driven, he excelled both in the classroom and on the gridiron, earning All-City honors in football. He worked hard at school and at life in order to breathe life into a dream, a dream he kept largely to himself simply because of its sheer audacity.

He wanted to become a doctor.

The ROTC paid for his education at Mercer University, where he rose to the level of company commander. At Mercer, he also began dating my mother, Peggy Wommack. They married during his first year at the Medical College of Georgia. Moving back to Macon for his surgical residency, he served as chief resident before joining the Army during the Vietnam War. The Army sent him to Savannah, where he became chief of surgery at Tuttle Hospital.

He would never live anywhere else.

After his Army days ended, Jack opened a general surgery practice and operated in Savannah for 35 years – serving as chief of staff for both Candler and St. Joseph's hospitals. He also taught surgical residents at Memorial and was the team doctor for numerous high school football teams. He was known for whistling jauntily as he roamed the hospital hallways. His nickname? "Happy Jack."

Happy Jack's life was not without tragedy, however. Peggy died unexpectedly at the age of 50 of a ruptured thoracic aortic aneurysm. My father would be forever haunted by his inability to save her. The practice of medicine still filled his days, but his nights were empty and his future was barren, his soul having been deeply wounded by my mother's untimely death.

When my father finally retired, a victim of the relentless assault of time, he was inconsolable.

"All I ever wanted to do was be a doctor," he said. "And now that's over."

Only it isn't.

I used to tag along with my father when he made rounds, watching him as he sat on patients' beds and made each of them feel as though they were the most important person in the world. I learned more medicine from those days on rounds with him than I did in all four years of medical school. "Happy Jack" taught me about treating patients with compassion and respect. The science and art of medicine intersect in the context of a healthy doctor-patient relationship. Good physicians learn early on how important that is. Bad ones never do.

My father's profoundly unselfish life has made mine infinitely easier. And there are some days, like this one, when I realize that I have not told him that nearly enough.

So remember this, Daddy: You're the reason I do what I do. Your legacy lives on in every single patient I care for. Your patients, many of whom I see daily, all still love you.

And you know what? I do, too. With all my heart.

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