



MICHAEL E. DEBAKEY, M.D.: BELOVED BROTHER, MASTER MENTOR, COMPATIBLE COLLEAGUE, PROFESSIONAL PARAGON

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Doing easily what others find difficult is talent, doing what is impossible for talent is genius. - *Henri Federic Amiel, Journal*

"I wanted to see what made it fly," preschooler Michael DeBakey explained to his concerned Father, who, seeing his son sitting on his bloodied hands beside an eviscerated bird, asked why he had cut open the bird. Thus did the "greatest surgeon of all time" and "the father of modern cardiovascular surgery"¹ early display his insatiable intellectual curiosity and a proclivity for research. To satisfy his unquenchable thirst for knowledge and discovery, he asked interminable questions at the dinner table beginning with "who, what, where, when, and how." His parents would often give him enough information to stimulate his curiosity and then urge him to read about the subject in books - and we, in turn, would hear that same advice when we asked our "big brother" questions.

Curiosity is, of course, a well-recognized characteristic of childhood - there is so much for life to write on the child's *tabula rasa* - but Michael went beyond asking questions to search for answers himself. When he found the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in our neighborhood library, he told of its "wonders of information," and our parents bought a set. He was always fascinated with gadgets and, like our

father, could take them apart and reassemble them skillfully.

Because our Father owned pharmacies that physicians visited frequently, Michael was exposed to the medical profession early in life. Dr. T.H. Watkins, our family physician and friend who made house calls to our home, was a particular influence because he not only looked the part of the kindly family doctor, but also had a warm and gentle bedside manner and always made us feel better when we were sick. Very early in life, Michael announced that he planned to become a doctor and never wavered from that goal.

Michael's maternal grandmother early prophesied that her daughter's first-born was a genius. His precocity, recognized early by family and friends, propelled him to the head of his class throughout his formal education, during which he was often bored as he waited for the rest of the class to "get it." But don't think he always had his nose in a book. Although a voracious reader, he was no "nerd," as modern parlance labels bookishness and social ineptness. In primary and secondary school, he was a popular student leader in athletics, music, and scholastics. He played football, mastered

several musical instruments, and participated in all the activities of normal young boys, including Boy Scouts. He and his brother Ernest, later a thoracic supersurgeon, also won awards for the city's best fruit-and-vegetable gardens, photographs of which appeared in the local paper. Although living in different cities where they practiced surgery, our brothers remained very close and devoted throughout their lives and spoke by telephone several times a week.

From childhood and adolescence into adulthood, Michael continued to excel in everything he did and to manifest an all-inclusive interest in matters of the mind. In adult life, in addition to his surgical genius, he was a charismatic visionary leader, global medical diplomat, prolific researcher and innovator, renowned scholar and author, artful teacher, unabashed bibliophile, superb, if demanding, model, - and an adored and loving brother. We readily acknowledge sibling bias regarding our beloved "big brother," but remind you that our exalted opinion of him is endorsed not only by the *cognoscenti*, but also by thoughtful, discerning people at high and low levels throughout the world. So we will characterize our

paeen by the oxymoron "biased objectivity."

Because he was the eldest child and we the two youngest children and because we idolized his accomplishments in school and out, his word was our command. We weren't elated, however, when he placed an aquarium in the garage, filled with crustaceans and other wiggly creatures, but we rebelled when he and Ernest converted our doll house to a doghouse. Needless to say, "big brother" prevailed. In fact, we never won an argument with him, although we learned a great deal from his powers of persuasion.

Family

Our parents - our first teachers - and our early family life were powerful influences throughout our lives.^{2 3 4} They were highly respected for their intelligence and character, and were often consulted for advice by our Governor, Mayor, District Attorney, Sheriff, Judges, and ordinary citizens. The Governor designated our Father a Louisiana Colonel in recognition of his contributions to our city and state. We were blessed with a privileged childhood. Indeed, it was idyllic because our parents were also warm and loving, and instilled in us from early childhood, not simply by word, but primarily by example, the high human principles of integrity, character, altruism, discipline, perseverance, and the pursuit of excellence. They showered us with material advantages and more, and they supported our education philosophically and financially through graduate school. But responsibility and self-discipline were also required. We were fortunate to have outstanding schools and excellent teachers in our home town. When each of us

entered college, we were better prepared than most for the advanced curriculum.

Our parents believed that the honor of our family name superseded materialistic and monetary wealth. The Dean of Tulane University School of Medicine, after being a guest in our home, referred to our Father, a highly successful entrepreneur known for his acuity, integrity, and independence, as a princely sage and to our Mother as an angelic queen. So if any of their children has made any contribution to society, it is our parents who deserve primary and major credit, as Michael often acknowledged.

As the first-born, Michael set almost insuperable standards for the rest of us in personal qualities, athletic prowess, and intellectual endeavors. His innate, steadfast honesty was evident in a childhood incident. Our Mother sent him to the neighborhood store to get some items she needed. When he returned, he told her he was short a quarter or so and wanted to go back immediately to pay the owner, even though the grocer told him to forget about it. Our Mother was busily preparing for guests and knew the owner was not concerned about the small deficit, which she would correct on her next shopping trip. But Michael was unrelenting; he kept pressing her until she gave him the money, and he returned to pay the amused grocer. Such intrinsic honesty and responsibility characterized Michael DeBakey throughout his life.

It was at his mother's side that he learned to sew. He was fascinated by her needle artistry - the beautiful linens, hand-tailored suits for him, his Father, and brother, and elegant dresses she fashioned for us from patterns she herself designed. When she sat at the sewing machine, Michael would watch

and then try his hand at it. Later in life, he would cut Dacron to fit his patients' arteries and would suture skin." Because the men in our family were secure in their masculinity, they were never concerned about participating in activities stereotyped by the incognizant as "feminine."

Philanthropy

Although extremely charitable, our parents never desired their names emblazoned on a monument praising their generosity. The family's weekly trips to the orphanage on the outskirts of our home town were a lesson that Michael and all of us never forgot. Each Sunday, after church and dinner, our parents would load the car with food, clothes, books, and toys and drive the family to the orphanage. Seeing the orphans' faces light up as they received their gifts was an unforgettable experience. Once when Michael objected to his mother's placing his favorite cap with the items to be donated, she explained that he would be getting another cap, but the child who received his favorite cap would not have such an opportunity. She assured him that when he saw how happy the new owner would be, a wonderful feeling would suffuse his heart.

That lesson always remained with him, and thereafter he practiced his own gesture of giving many times, in many ways, to many people. We were repeatedly the recipients of those gestures and of his treasured gifts, material and otherwise, during his lifetime. One of our most cherished possessions is a message accompanying our Christmas gifts in 2005, just days before he became ill: "Dear Selma and Lois, First, Merry Christmas. Second, and equally important, I love you both dearly, and I thank

God He blessed me with two angel sisters. I pray He will continue to shower us with His Blessings. Your loving brother Michael" Those few, highly evocative words define our relationship. The implicit bond in that exquisite Christmas missive was forged early in life by our parents and remained sacrosanct, impervious to even the most unpromising forces, and it remains intact today, for its home is in the inaccessible recesses of our innermost hearts.⁴

Michael's charitable instincts found expression throughout his life. Because he believed that teachers and spiritual leaders served a social purpose and were underpaid, he never charged them a fee for his services. With his focus on healing, not on profiting, he also did not charge the underprivileged who could not afford the usual surgical fees. Some patients later sent him small checks toward the cost of his services, with heartrending letters of appreciation and with promises to pay more when able to do so. He would respond that his reward was their recovery and assured them that he did not expect payment. A considerable percentage of his surgical fees also reverted to his institutions and other noble causes.

In 1961, he established The DeBakey Medical Foundation (DMF), a nonprofit organization to support and advance medical education and evidence-based biomedical research, with the ultimate goal of improving healthcare. He was unstinting in his insistence on rigorous scientific protocols for experimental research and clinical trials and dismissed testimonials of "healing" by persons or products unproved by scientific exactitude. Although the public spends megamillions annually on the euphemistically termed "alternative, integrative, or complementary

medicine," most research thus far has shown only a transient placebo effect.⁶ As everyone associated with Michael DeBakey knows, the DMF was always his primary philanthropic commitment, and from unsolicited donations received from grateful patients and admirers, he contributed multimillions to evidence-based medical research and education at his parent institution and elsewhere. As Founding President of the DMF and lifelong patients' advocate, he conceived this philanthropy as a means of encouraging and nurturing medical research, particularly in cardiovascular disease. When patients and others asked Michael how to write their checks in appreciation for his services and his contributions to humanity, he always directed them to The DeBakey Medical Foundation. Checks of appreciation made payable to him personally, he would endorse to this philanthropy.

Medical Education

Predictably, Michael entered medical school early, where the renowned Dr. Alton Ochsner, Chairman of the Department of Surgery at Tulane University School of Medicine, promptly discerned his acumen and ingenuity and invited him to join the Ochsner research team. Earlier, Michael's zoology professor in the College of Arts and Sciences had appointed him a Teaching Assistant and had issued a similar invitation. Michael was permitted to enter medical school after only two years of pre-medical education and to pursue his undergraduate and medical degrees simultaneously. As a medical student research-assistant, he developed the roller pump that became an essential component of John Gibbon's heart-lung machine,⁷ which launched open-heart surgery. In the ensuing years of associa-

tion with Dr. Ochsner, Michael published prolifically on a wide range of surgical topics, including coronary artery surgery, thrombophlebitis, and the first recognition of a link between cigarette smoking and cancer of the lung.⁸

Michael was a handsome young man who looked somewhat like Valentino, and the debutantes in New Orleans fought for his attention. Like his Father and brother, he was always known for his sartorial elegance - conservative, custom-tailored suits, and harmonious, muted hues, never blatant designs or bold, flashy colors. His clothes, like everything about him, reflected his inherent dignity.

Everything Michael did was well conceived, well planned, thoroughly mastered, and virtually flawless - his research, surgery, teaching, and national and international activities. His writing followed the same precise, painstaking approach: thorough bibliographic research, meticulous analysis of data, and logically organized development. His manuscripts moved from valid thesis to lucid presentation of data or argument, with supporting illustrations, to well-reasoned conclusions, all meticulously documented with primary references. Dr. Franz Ingelfinger, a former Editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine* wrote of him: "If he were not so busy as a famous surgeon and medical statesman, brother Michael also might be a member of the [Selma and Lois] DeBakey team, dedicated to improving the doctor's skill in communication."⁹

Master Mentor

When Michael went away to college, we were in grammar school, and he corresponded with us regularly. We would proudly send him our report cards showing what most considered high marks, and like

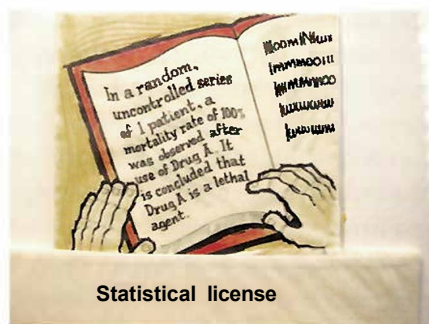


Figure 1. © Lois DeBakey

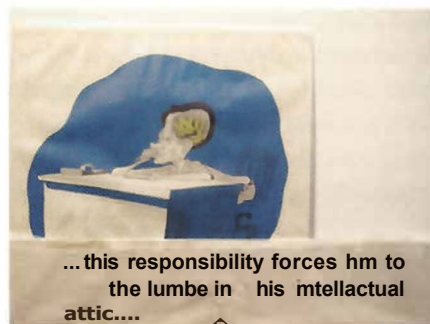


Figure 6. © Lois DeBakey



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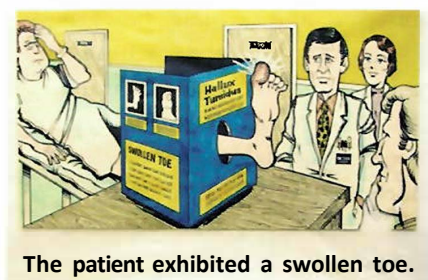


Figure 3. © Lois DeBakey

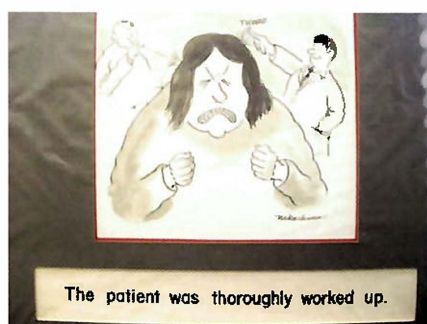


Figure 4. © Lois DeBakey

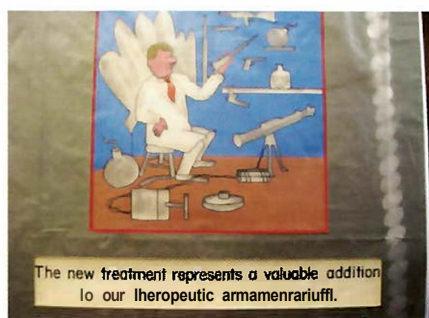


Figure 5. © Lois DeBakey

our parents, he would commend us but then assure us that we could "make 100 next time." And when we wrote that Mr. Nash, our primary school principal, had asked us to substitute-teach our classes when the regular teacher was ill, he cautioned us: "Now you must learn the assigned work perfectly so no one will ask you a question you can't answer." Interestingly, when we did substitute-teach, there was no disruption by unruly students taking advantage of an absence of adults in the classroom. That was, of course, an era before children took "freedom of expression" liberally, *sans* accountability.

It was during his vast bibliographic research as a medical student, resident, and young Tulane Medical faculty member that he recognized the need for improvement in the substance and style of biomedical reporting and publishing. And therein lay an inordinate gift to us - a unique, exciting, and fulfilling career. Michael took an early interest in our education, counseling and guiding us in our selection of a college and curricula. Both of us received academic scholarships to Tulane University's Sophie Newcomb College, then one of the nation's foremost institutions of higher learning for women. When Selma graduated from college, she entered graduate school, simultaneously doing bibliographic research

for Michael and his colleagues, abstracting English publications, translating foreign articles, and editing medical manuscripts. During her bibliographic research, she, like Michael, recognized the need for higher standards of content and form in medical publications. Both had noted the uncritical reasoning that produced implausible theses, faulty organization, invalid data (Figure 1), incoherent development and unsupportable conclusions in peer-reviewed medical journals (Figure 2). The language was another problem: pretentious words (Figure 3), tattered cliches (Figure 4), mindless frozen forms (Figure 5), and inadvertent humor (Figure 6), all resulting in unpalatable, unreadable, soporific prose (Figure 7).

At our brother's recommendation, Selma began her pioneering work of establishing a new discipline of critical reasoning and analysis; biomedical writing, speaking, and graphic illustration; publishing; literary and scientific ethics; and related topics. When Lois graduated from college soon thereafter, she joined Selma, and a lifelong team was formed with an impassioned goal of upgrading what is euphemistically called "the medical literature."

Because there would be natural resistance to instruction in one's native tongue by residents and physicians, including those who

had learned to cut, we realized that we needed a tool to engage our students' interest. As we collected examples of faulty logic and language in medical journals, amusing graphic representations of them appeared in our minds. We converted those to cartoons, which became the signature of our courses and popularized them. Dr. C. Rollins Hanlon, former Director of the American College of Surgery, said of our courses at the annual meetings of that organization: "Their courses were the most popular by far."² Dr. Don Lindberg, Director of the National Library of Medicine remarked, "All of us were greatly entertained [by their instruction], and also lived in mortal fear we'd fall in that trap - and into their collection."² But, that fear was unnecessary, since we never identified the authors.

In those early years, Michael worked with Selma late into the night, presaging his indefatigable lifetime habit. They would break for dinner and then return to his office, one whole side of which was packed high on a long counter with bound and unbound journals and books from the Tulane Medical Library and from the eminent Dr. Rudolph Matas's magnificent personal library. Several hours later, he would drive Selma home and then go home himself for a few hours' sleep before rising early the next morning for another fully packed day of surgery, patient rounds, lectures, research, and writing. His long work days we can attribute only to genetics, for our father, too, rarely slept more than four or five hours a night and was productively active during the other 19 to 20 hours.

When we attended out-of-town meetings with Michael, he had his driver pick us up, then swing

by for him, and we would ride together to and from the airport. Once in the city of our destination, he would have us join him and his colleagues for dinner. Michael and Lois attended meetings of the National Library of Medicine Board of Regents together during the 1990s, when Michael was appointed Chairman of the Regents for the second time; he had previously served on the first NLM Board of Regents. At one of the Board meetings, the Associate Director showed a slide: "When the DeBakeys talk, people listen." Of course, he was referring to Michael, but because Lois was also at the table, he generously included both. People did listen whenever he spoke. Hiram C. Polk referred to the wise "words of the world's leading surgeon" as "all the more notable because this author seldom speaks and never speaks casually."¹⁰

Michael was very protective of us, having early been entrusted by our parents with our safety and welfare when we departed home for college. He continued that role throughout his life. After being recruited by Baylor College of Medicine, we shared his office suite and worked with him daily, assisting and supporting his vast and varied professional activities across a broad range, and because we, too, worked after office hours, he would take the time to come to our offices after others had left and urge us to go home.

He enjoyed taking a respite from the pressures of his crowded schedule and stopping by our home for a meal of his beloved Mother's menu. On weekends, he would often come by our home, sometimes with his son Barry, for lunch or dinner, and it was always a treat for us when he would sit at the piano and play compositions that we loved, but that

he had not practiced for decades. During his extensive travels, he always kept in touch with us by telephone. The travel cards we prepared for him, detailing everything he was scheduled to do and everyone he was to see, by date, hour, and site, became an object of curiosity and conversation for many.

After working at Tulane Medical School for a few years, Selma received an offer that she could not refuse, to serve as the Medical Editor for distinguished surgeon-academics in Chicago. Michael thought the experience would be in her best interest. He and his wife Diana took her to Chicago, got her settled in a lovely girls' club residence, and saw that she was entirely comfortable. That was the kind of solicitude we were blessed with from both our wonderful brothers. After a couple of years in the Windy City, Selma was recruited to return to New Orleans to assist several prominent surgeons who were writing books and to establish and direct the Editorial Department of the Ochsner Clinic and Foundation, where she remained until she was recruited by Baylor College of Medicine. During her tenure there, she wrote and edited a number of books, served as Guest Editor of prestigious medical periodicals, and taught many physicians how to write, edit, and publish medical articles and books. Lois, who had served on the English faculty of the Tulane College of Arts and Sciences, as Editor of the *Tulane Studies in English*, and then as Professor of Scientific Communication at Tulane Medical School, was recruited by Baylor at the same time as Selma.



Figure 8. Prof. Selma DeBakey, Or. Michael E. OeBakey, Prof. Lois DeBakey.

The Durable Triad

The bond of mutual trust that our brother shared with us was inviolable.⁴ As Michael told a reporter, "You share your thoughts with them, even though you might not be able to share them with others. You don't feel alone."¹¹ He also entrusted us with his strictest confidences and most valuable awards, honors, papers, and memorabilia, as well as personal items, because he knew we would hold them secure at all costs. (Figure 8)

Despite worldwide acclaim, countless prestigious honors, and ascension to international "celebrity" status, Michael remained humble and modest throughout his life. When we were living in New Orleans, and he was changing planes there, he always asked us to meet him at the airport during his layover. Laden with his favorite foods, we met his plane, and once, as we were walking together down

a concourse, a young man kept racing alongside us to get ahead and snap a picture. Michael turned to us and asked if we knew the young man and wondered why he was taking our pictures. The photographer was, of course, taking *his* picture, not ours, because he recognized Michael and admired his achievements. Often, whether he was in a New Orleans French Quarter restaurant, a Houston club, a cab, or in another city, someone would come up to ask for his autograph or to tell him how much they appreciated his operating on a relative. To the end, he received loving letters from grateful patients or their relatives, praising his surgical prowess and his exquisite compassion.

Michael's life-saving surgical innovations, his relentless advocacy of medical research and health care, and his frequent Congressional testimony to support these issues earned him demonstrable respect

from Congress. When he entered a Congressional room, all the representatives and senators rose and applauded. Because of the worthiness of his cause and the esteem in which he was held, he was able to influence legislation to favor medical research and its ultimate beneficiaries, patients.

Adversity

Michael's mettle was tested often in his life, and he always passed with flying colors. His self-discipline and determination to pursue a path he had thoroughly studied and concluded was worthy allowed him to persist despite prodigious obstacles and formidable opposition to his high standards of excellence and ethics. Few today know of the resistance he endured when he proposed requiring approved residency training and Board certification for surgeons in Houston. When he arrived, promises of an affiliated hospital residency program fell through, but because of what he might modestly call *kismet* and what most would call his perseverance, such an opportunity opened at the Houston Naval Hospital when it was converted into a Veterans Administration Hospital. He overcame the impediments with his powers of rational persuasion, and he inspired others to join him in self-abnegation and in embracing altruism for the higher good. In the words of Albert Einstein, "Great spirits have always encountered opposition from mediocre minds."

Contrary to the unattributed and totally unfounded statement in an obituary,¹² Michael DeBakey was an internationally acclaimed scholar who was meticulous in acknowledging relevant work of others and was known for his comprehensive citation of references. We were eyewitnesses to his unfailing attention to scientific evidence and accuracy,

because we processed all of his manuscripts in our editorial office, and those files substantiated his scientific and literary integrity. His articles, including those reporting his pioneering surgical feats, were published in the most prestigious peer-reviewed journals, where they were scrutinized by leaders in his field before being accepted for publication. No medical journal, editor, or reviewer ever questioned the scientific or citation validity of his manuscripts, which were eagerly sought by premier medical editors and publishers because of their originality and scientific primacy. False claims were not in his nature, and he had no need for self promotion, since his contributions stood on their own merit and were recognized worldwide. His countless prestigious honors and awards were never his goal; his greatest satisfaction came from seeing patients return to normal life and from devising procedures or discovering new knowledge that benefited humanity. Michael DeBakey is no longer here to defend against unfounded intimations, but the historical record of his genuine humanitarianism confirms his pristine professional and personal honesty and integrity.

Physician-Patient Relationship and Reaction to Death

Everyone who worked with Michael recognized his grief when he lost a patient despite "living in the hospital" vigilantly monitoring the patient. He often said that when a physician loses a patient, he loses a part of himself. And he always tried to learn from such painful experiences so he could save future patients. He had almost a mystical relationship with his patients, who loved him and often said that when he laid his hand gently on

them, they felt something almost divine. Many of them told of their special experiences as a patient of his, including his kindness to their families and friends. That quality of empathy, which is a component of physician competence, he had in abundance. When asked by a reporter if he "took his work home," he responded, "Of course I do. Any physician who does not should not be in this profession."

Scholar

Not only was Michael DeBakey extraordinarily prolific in his medical publications (more than 1,500), but, unlike some physicians who restrict their reading to medicine, he was exceptionally well-read in history, literature, poetry, philosophy, religion, and related topics. This habit began early when he read the entire Encyclopaedia Britannica, which, granted, was not as voluminous as it is today, but which he would have completed regardless of size. His legendary broad-based lore of knowledge, as anyone knows who ever had a social conversation with him, mesmerized, enthralled, and astonished his listeners.

Standards of Excellence

Because we were reared with the same standards of excellence as he was, we understood his frustration with anything less. He used to bring us letters or other documents that had been typed elsewhere and say that he could not put his signature on them because they did not meet his standards, and he would ask us to re-do them. At other times, he would let them go in the interest of time, but would lament the decline in literacy, reasoning, propriety, and civility, all of which saddened him. He could never accept low standards of performance or dilatoriness, whether in

the operating room, in his office, or elsewhere, although circumstances sometimes required his tolerating them.

The Medical Team and The Methodist Hospital

We are deeply grateful to our brother's original superb surgical and associated team of physicians and to the Administration, nurses, and staff of The Methodist Hospital who took tender care of our precious brother as they would their own family despite exigencies. They are unsung heroes. Dr. George Noon and others on the team suffered personally through our brother's illness, but always found the time and the heart to offer understanding and empathy to his closest relatives. For us, our brother's loss was the loss of our world, for we had early fully dedicated ourselves to his vision, career, and well-being, and climbing out of the dark abyss that followed our loss is a challenge.

Invictus

Toward the end, some tried to take control by interrupting or otherwise interfering with visits from friends and colleagues. He sometimes had to admonish them that he knew better than they how to manage his time. There were some, far and uncomfortably near, who foolishly imagined empowering themselves by adopting his persona and thus basking in the luster of his reflected glory. Notwithstanding such attempts, he remained the "Captain of his soul" to the end.

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*

In an effort to receive his blessings, some who had disappointed him by circumventing certain of his cherished principles tried to expunge the ensuing disjunction. Although never vengeful toward betrayal, he believed that true absolution came from the omniscience and omnipotence of a Higher Power and left it to each person to resolve such issues according to his own conscience and within his own heart.

A Unique Human Phenomenon

There will never be another Michael Ellis DeBakey. But this man of consummate genius and of sterling character lives on, not simply in the physical monuments to his boundless philanthropy and his ingenious life-giving contributions to humanity, but in the halls of history of the noble men who have graced this earth and have left it infinitely better than when they came, and in the hearts of all who admired and loved him. In the inimitable words of Edmund Spencer, "The genius survives; all else is claimed by death."

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