

WILLIAM H. HARRIS, M.D.

MENTOR, COLLEAGUE, FRIEND – MY HERO

BY DENNIS W. BURKE M.D.

I first met Bill Harris over twenty years ago during my Orthopaedic rotation at the MGH as a senior medical student. He had a sizable entourage in tow: nurses, therapists, students, residents and fellows. He was always ahead of everyone on rounds. I had trouble keeping up with him then, just as I do now. His fifty-year career as a physician and researcher can be characterized as a constant effort to improve his field. Fittingly, he chose the chambered nautilus as the symbol for his beloved Orthopaedics Lab, whose motto is “Build thee a Better House”.

Born in Great Falls, Montana, raised in Harrisburg and educated at the University of Pennsylvania, Bill Harris first came to Boston after a two-year stint in the Air Force. He rolled his first plaster under the tutelage of the stern Dr. William T. Green at Children’s Hospital. A Chief Residency at the MGH set the stage for fellowships in nuclear medicine at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in England. He then returned to the MGH to join the office of Otto Aufranc, along with Drennan Lowell, M.P. Smith-Peterson and later Rod Turner and Hugh Chandler.

Mel Glimcher, Chief at the time, assigned half of Bill’s energies to the lab and half to clinical service, a commitment he has continued to this day. His paper on the “Repair of the Quadriceps Mechanism”, written as a general medical officer during his Air Force time in Alaska, began his writing career. To this date, Harris has authored an incredible 412 scientific papers, with no end in sight.

Bill Harris often uses this sentiment of Louis Pasteur’s, “Chance favors the prepared mind.” His sense of inquisitiveness about clinical problems and the desire to improve existing medical practices has led him to the front of his field. As a novice practitioner, a pulmonary embolus took the life of a young patient. Thrombophlebitis, then a poorly understood entity, was responsible for a mortality rate of up to 2% after major orthopaedic surgery. This tragedy so affected him that it prompted a lifelong investigation into the cause and effective prevention of DVT after hip surgery. His efforts and the efforts of others have dramatically reduced the occurrence of this dreaded postoperative orthopaedic complication. Later the observation of a single case of periprosthetic osteolysis led to a series of seminal laboratory investigations that characterized the biologic effects of small particle disease, a major nemesis to the longevity of all prosthetic joint implants. A joint effort led by Harris at MGH and Ed Merrill at MIT has produced a new prosthetic bearing surface now in clinical use, which promises to dramatically reduce the source of small particulate debris, thereby extending the life of joint implants. This practice of identifying clinical problems, bringing them to the lab, employing a team of talented people to work it through from all angles and produce a practical improvement, for the betterment of patients and surgeons, has been Bill Harris’ modus operandi and is his way of building a better house like the Chambered Nautilus.

This month, friends, family, colleagues, former residents and Fellows came from all over the world to Boston to honor this man in a “Festschrift”, or celebration, of his life’s work.

A small sampling of his many awards, honors and achievement, mentioned at this gala includes the North American Traveling Fellowship, over 400 peer reviewed scientific articles, numerous Hip Society awards and The Mueller Award. The establishment of the William H. Harris Chair of Orthopaedic Surgery at Partners was announced last week by Dr. Sam Thier. Alan Gerry, a very grateful patient, recently endowed The Alan Gerry Chair of Orthopaedics at Harvard Medical School which Bill Harris now holds.

Harris is not only a physician but a mentor and teacher. He demands excellence from those under his tutelage, and gets it. Every morning at 7:00 AM sharp the light box is turned on, the x-rays go up, and the pedagogy of Bill Harris starts. “Is that an observation or an interpretation?” he would inquire to a new resident. An idle gaze by a Fellow will bring a gentle admonishment to “take the brain out of neutral.” Every proposed surgical intervention by a resident or Fellow must be backed up by facts or a disapproving frown will result from the Maestro. His hand has gently guided countless hands of his apprentice surgeons, transforming neophytes into master surgeons, who in turn, will pass on this gift to future generations. His talent is the ability to extract the utmost from his students, while still getting and giving respect, the highest compliment from a teacher.

Just like Bill Murray in the Movie “Groundhog Day” Bill Harris every morning gets up to a new set of residents, Fellows and patients, and begins all over again the methodical education of the surgeon and treatment of the patient. Never bored with the recurrent tasks, every patient is unique, every resident an individual. He has trained over 80 Fellows and hundreds of Residents, many of whom are now Professors, Department Chairs or just plain practicing docs like myself, all of whom owe to this man, often in an intangible way, their ability to practice medicine.

To the outside observer Bill Harris can seem like a tough guy who suffer fools poorly, compulsive to a fault, stern and demanding. After 25 years, I know the real Bill Harris. He is a gentle man who cares so very much for every person in his life. The word loyalty could be defined by the true friendship he shows , in good times and bad. Your illness is his illness, and your troubles are his troubles. I know I do not speak only for myself when I offer to Bill Harris my deepest heartfelt congratulations upon this dedication of The Orthopaedic Journal at Harvard Medical School to him — a man I am so very proud to call my mentor, colleague, friend and hero.