Who Do You Say You Are?

Walter H. Merrill, MD

Department of Cardiac Surgery, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, Tennessee

Members of the Southern Thoracic Surgical Association and guests, it is an honor to stand before you this morning. I am grateful for the kind introduction by Erle Austin. He has been generous in purposefully overlooking most of my faults and shortcomings. I am reminded of the words of Winston Churchill, who, when speaking of another person, could well have been speaking of me when he described “a modest little person, with much to be modest about.” It has been a wonderful and meaningful experience to serve as your President. I wish to give special thanks to the current staff, Council, committee members, and others who have been so helpful to me and have been instrumental in moving the agenda of this special organization forward. I also remind you of the remarkable contributions of former members of our support staff, especially those of Nancy Puckett, Katie Bochenek, and Joyce Gambino.

There are many things that I owe to numerous people. One of my favorite sayings concerns the importance of choosing your parents carefully. Of course that is not possible, but I am most fortunate to be one of the offspring of two wonderful parents. Although my father died when I was quite young, I have felt his constant presence in my life, and my mother continues to be an amazing source of inspiration, wisdom, and love. I am also fortunate to have a fantastic sister who has been supportive of me over the years. I cannot say enough about the tolerance, understanding, and steadfast love that have been showered upon me by my wife, Morgan, our four wonderful children, and all the members of my extended family. To those mentioned, especially, and to countless friends, colleagues, mentors, coaches, teachers, domestic workers, students, residents, patients and patients’ families, and so many others, I am deeply indebted to you and eternally grateful. Without the love and support of all these people, nothing would have been possible, surely nothing would have been accomplished, and no aspect of the journey would have been worthwhile.

Our annual meeting brings us together as a body to celebrate scholarship, fellowship, and service. Similar to many other professional societies, the meeting continues to maintain the tradition of a Presidential Address. While one can argue whether or not such an activity is necessary, or a good idea, it does afford your President the opportunity to stand here before you and to utilize the “bully pulpit,” which is generally considered a first-rate opportunity to speak on almost any topic. I am hopeful that this presentation will be seen as an affirming discussion of our mutually held core beliefs and that it will invoke higher principles for all of us to consider. It is my goal to remind us of our shared sense of obligation to the past and our collective responsibility to the future. Who do you say you are?

Today I am posing a question, actually, several questions. We are a people who tend to search for answers. While I support broad utilization of the scientific method and all the collective efforts to find answers to questions, I have decided that it is more interesting, perhaps more rewarding, and possibly more important, to spend time thinking about what are the key questions. Recall the wisdom expressed in this familiar saying, “The answer you get depends on the question you ask.” It requires courage to struggle through the formulation of tough questions, as one has to be prepared for whatever answers might be discovered. The key is to be open to exploring new possibilities. So, I request that you stand with me, and help me struggle a bit today with the concept of trying not to find or declare answers, but to work through and examine an effort to pose questions.

I am going to focus the questions only on a limited spectrum concerning various aspects of our lives. To borrow Lincoln’s phrase, I am choosing to dwell on topics that I consider to be related to the “better angels of our nature.”

You might ask, what are some of the inspirations behind this effort at question asking? One of the most
powerful examples of an effort to pose a question in just the right way comes from the words of Robert F. Kennedy. He said, “There are those who look at things the way they are and ask why...I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?” Another source of inspiration is drawn from Socrates, who told us that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Perhaps by that statement he meant that all persons should question their desires, customs, habits, and beliefs, and everyone should pursue opportunities for reflection, assessment, and the asking of questions.

This is an attempt to dig a bit deeper, to try to look at things through another lens. Perhaps we might indulge, if only for a little while, in a different way of seeing our surroundings and our place within them. Let us use the faculties of imagination, intuition, and wonder, get away from the typical focus on reason and facts, and think about meaning.

Consider the comments of Roy Porter in The Greatest Benefit to Mankind. He says, “Neither do we know anything concrete about most of the medical encounters that have ever been. The historical record is like the night sky: we see a few stars and group them into mythic constellations. But what is chiefly visible is the darkness.” It is only when we pause, and take the time for a deeper look, then we begin to get a glimpse of what lies beyond our usual scope of vision. We must learn to see not only with our eyes, but also with our hearts, so that we might discover what is truly essential. Along with this new way of seeing, we must learn to embrace mystery and develop an affinity for probing its secrets and holding it in dynamic tension with what is known or certain.

Think about the experience of the photographer, Dewitt Jones, when he was walking in a field of wildflowers one day, trying to find something of beauty to photograph. He was filled with disappointment that the wildflowers were dead. He was looking for outward and obvious manifestations of visible beauty, and he had to see beauty first in order to believe that it was present. Then, in a moment of inspiration, he reoriented his thinking. He realized something profound. All of a sudden he understood the secret of discovering beauty, “if I believe it, I will see it.”

When Abraham Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address, he predicted, incorrectly, that “The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here....” Unlike his immortal speech, much of what is said today will soon be forgotten. Perhaps all is not lost. My hope is, in these few minutes while we pause together to reflect, you will feel something, and that somehow this discussion will help you to connect with your innermost feelings, with your inner sense of self. Maybe Maya Angelou was correct when she said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Or to put it another way, consider Malcolm Gladwell’s comment, “It succeeds or fails on the strength of its ability to engage you, to make you think, to give you a glimpse into someone else’s head—even if in the end you conclude that someone else’s head is not a place you’d really like to be.”

What I have to offer is not nearly as important as the ongoing efforts that I hope each of you will engage yourselves in, which is to think about the questions that you want to pose as you go forward in your respective lives. The real interest lies in your future efforts to ask questions. The idea is that each of us should attempt to arrive at, through contemplation and formulating questions, a comprehensive and coherent articulation of sensibility, which would help us to see ourselves and the world and our places in it in new ways, and which would have us live out our lives in accordance with that vision.

WHO do you say you ARE? Notice that the question is not the usual one, so frequently asked, “What do you do?” Rather, the “what” is replaced by “who,” and the “do” is replaced by “are.” The question asks us to consider more than the work and other activities that we are engaged in and the responsibilities to which we answer. It suggests that we need to go beyond the common practice of equating who we are with what we do. It allows us to focus on the fact that we are commonly engrossed in the busy-ness of life. When we pause, and take time to reflect, then we understand that we must concern ourselves not only with all of that busy-ness but also an awareness of history, sensitivity to place, respect for the natural order, acknowledgement of and coming to grips with our human limitations, and a commitment to honorable conduct in every respect. What we are doing is pursuing our vocation, which is not to say a goal, but rather listening to and responding to our calling. William Osler says, “The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade, a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head....To you as the trusted family counselor the father will come with his anxieties, the mother with her hidden griefs, the daughter with her trials, and the son with his follies.”

Where are you going? We are all in the midst of a journey, or pilgrimage. For hundreds if not thousands of years people have made pilgrimages, traveling to some far off land, making a physical journey that adds subtly to the efforts to complete the inner journey. Commonly one encounters great uncertainty along the journey. Wisdom has been defined as the ability to cope with that uncertainty. Pilgrimages are made as acts of penance, or acts of thanksgiving, or attempts to obtain supernatural assistance. There is the attraction of the end of the journey, or destination, the mysterious pull of a holy place [1]. It is natural to focus one’s mind and effort on arriving at the intended destination and to give far less attention to the process and all that is involved in moving from where one is to where one wishes to go.

Having a goal in mind can lead one to ignore the beauty and the overall importance of the journey itself. The challenge is to focus less on the future and more on the here and now, to give ourselves over to the beauty and joy of the present moment, to concern ourselves with the being rather than the doing. The hope of achieving a transcendent experience may well be accomplished anywhere along the journey, not necessarily at the point...
of destination. Through pilgrimage we change our place, and potentially change our state; thus it signifies a rite of passage [1]. We seek perfection, but recall the beauty of Chinese art, which always intentionally contains a flaw to remind us that humanity is fallible.

What is our journey about? Do we believe what Shakespeare said through the voice of Macbeth, that each of us is “a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Consider, if you will, an alternative point of view. John Mason Brown tells us that “Life owes us little; we owe it everything. The only true happiness comes from squandering ourselves for a purpose” [2]. The journey that we tread involves the confluence of past, present, and future. There is a notion of duality as we perceive darkness and light, limitations and possibilities, the journey and the destination. There is a mysterious unity in all of this experience if we can only merge the mind and the heart, grow toward integration, and dissolve the barriers that separate us from ourselves and from others. T.S. Eliot spoke to this issue of journey and meaning and discovery of truth. He said, “We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

How do we move forward? Sometimes the road ahead seems relatively straightforward and simple, as exemplified in the wisdom of Yogi Berra, who advised that when one encounters a fork in the road one should simply take it. However, things are not always that clean and neat, and the way forward can be perplexing. Consider a multicursal maze, where one encounters choice, confusion, and doubt. It is at moments such as these that we have to dig down within ourselves and call upon our deepest reservoirs of strength, confidence, and willingness to push forward despite uncertainty.

What would you do if you were not afraid? Do not forget that fear drives behavior. We start out with dreams and considerations of possibilities, but these are taken over by doubt and practicality. The tendency is to stay within our comfort zones, with the rationalization that by so doing we will stay safe. Some would say that this practice only serves to keep us small, not safe. The solution for combating fear is to attempt to defy the impossible, to go forward with passion, determination, insight, and faith.

Are you willing to take on the mantle of leadership? We are made for community, so leadership is everyone’s vocation. In a close-knit community, everyone follows and everyone leads. Vaclav Havel tells us that authentic leaders in every setting aim at liberating the heart, their own and others’. Leadership implies the power to project either shadow or light.

How do we care for our patients? We live in an era of fantastic advances, with unprecedented amounts of information available to us in textbooks, video recordings, various computer-based platforms, et cetera. The technological tools that we have at our disposal are phenomenal. However, there are some dangers associated with the current state of affairs. It has been stated that “Medicine is no longer the laying on of hands, it is more like the reading of signals from machines” [3]. If we are not careful, the use of technology can supplant taking the time to sit still and talk to patients. We must remember the art and the power of listening and touching.

Let’s pause for a moment and examine Sir Luke Fildes’s painting, The Doctor (Fig 1). Fildes’s eldest son Phillip died on Christmas morning 1877. He was attended by Dr Murray, who impressed Fildes with his care and attention to the dying child and who became a symbol of professional devotion. Fildes said that he wanted “to put on record the status of the doctor in our own time.”
The painting clearly points out the limitations of the physician. He has administered some medication, but the child remains severely ill. Most likely this has gone on all night, as the early rays of dawn are just beginning to appear through the window. The light on the table and the position of the doctor and patient lead us to come down our vision and focus attention on the essential drama of medicine, which is the creation of a relationship, or bond, between the doctor and the patient. This relationship is depicted by the one central action depicted, which is attention. Remember the words of Dr Frances Peabody, "The good physician knows his patients through and through, and his knowledge is bought dearly. Time, sympathy, and understanding must be lavishly dispensed, but the reward is to be found in that personal bond which forms the greatest satisfaction of the practice of medicine. One of the essential qualities of the clinician is interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient" [4].

What are your sacred spaces? These can be defined as discrete places, with a specified geography, but they can also be defined as those events in life that lift us up from wherever we are to our highest calling. It is interesting to note that these are shared spaces, which implies the importance of community in our lives. Do you experience that special sense of "magic" and mystery when you are at the patient’s bedside? Is each patient interaction, in effect, a sacred space, not just another encounter [5]?

If one pursues this line of thinking, then acts of service are placed within a spiritual perspective. Doing so does not, in any way, diminish the special education, training, and extraordinary skills that are necessary to care for patients. On the other hand, considering acts of service within a spiritual perspective provides a richer sense of who we are and allows unique talents and qualities to come forth more reliably. Remember that opportunities for service abound and can be found anywhere. We just need to be conscious and aware of the need for service, then do the best we can to fulfill those needs. Remember how Dr Dwight McGoon viewed our work. He said, “All efforts in research, education, administration, writing, editing, and long hours of intensive labor at the operating table have inherent and transcendent value only in one respect...as an unselfish expression of concern for the welfare of needful human beings” [6].

Illness strips away the outer veneer of guile and reveals the vulnerability of patients. They frequently exhibit openness, courage, perseverance, patience, acceptance, dignity, and sometimes humor. Let us be moved and touched by the exhibition of these qualities and reaffirm our common humanity. However it can be accomplished, we should develop an appreciation of the fact that we are witnesses to something profound and wonderful, something hard to describe and hard to understand. Without a doubt it is troubling to be pulled out of our comfort zones and made to confront the limitations of our knowledge and abilities and technology. Our natural tendency is to seek to be knowledgeable and confident and self-assured. It is difficult to do, but we must learn to acknowledge that we do not understand everything we have experienced, yet we stand together in the truth of our uncertainty.

Some of the most profound and moving experiences anyone can encounter occur at the bedside, at the time of death, with family members in attendance. When a patient dies, especially following a prolonged illness, a terrible sadness is encountered. At the same time, there can be a sense of gladness that suffering has come to a final end. There may be anger that some terrible tragedy has happened. Those who loved the patient may experience feelings of guilt related to unfinished business. By being fully present in the moment, one experiences a deep sense of empathy for all involved. There is a feeling of awe and wonder, searching for an explanation that you don’t have. It requires time and patience to be there, to take it all in, to process it. Doing so can be painful, yet it brings great rewards. Most of the time one comes away with a sense of peace of mind. Somehow being there and processing it all leads to an appreciation of life, and all of its struggles, even in the presence of such pain.

What are your concerns regarding the future of medicine? I am reminded of the comments made many years ago by a former colleague, Dr Gottlieb Friesinger. His response to the question was both simple and profound. He said, “I am not concerned regarding the future. There will always be opportunities, in one form or another, for scholarship and for service.” What we are about is to nurture human freedom in the service of the human community, which is a celebration of love. After all, the reward of service to others is the opportunity not only to help relieve suffering but also to grow in wisdom, to experience a greater sense of unity, to be refreshed so that we can carry on. Helping others can be difficult as they make demands on us, their reactions may be unpredictable, and we may be reminded of our own inadequacies and vulnerability. We also must contend with our own inertia and move forward, opening ourselves to the ambiguity of the unknown and learning new roles [7].

How wide is your tent? Who will you allow to sit under it with you? We face conflict, discord, disagreement; every one of us, every day. It is commonplace to consider who is right, who is wrong? It is natural to pay attention to and to emphasize our differences. The differences in appearance, background, attitudes, interests, and beliefs are easy to spot. It is difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue with those with whom we disagree and attempt to discover whether or not there are points of agreement or some middle ground that might be achieved. The commonalities that bind us together are frequently hard to perceive. What is the solution? Let us consider the admonition of E.M. Forster in Howard’s End: “Only connect-the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect....”

Due to the contributions of others we are able to glimpse a more distant horizon and to contemplate the future with hope and confidence and a clearer understanding of its opportunities and possibilities. One can
argue that the path is clear. However, we need to see where things are less clear, and we must have the courage to sometimes get lost, so that we might unexpectedly arrive at a place different from the one we had sought.

Experiences from the past have formed us and have led us to where we are today. The past has imposed upon us a particular burden and responsibility to learn from those experiences, to build upon them, and to see in all human triumphs and tragedies of those times intimations of our own mortal, imperfect human nature.

How shall education be conducted? We are the custodians of a tradition [8]. Teaching the art and science of medicine, and that of other disciplines, has been going on for thousands of years. It is a form of regifting, or paying it forward. In all educational endeavors, not just those related to medicine, we must create that safe place, as Alexis de Tocqueville stated, “where the instruction that enlightens the understanding is not separated from the education that amends the heart.” We must undertake an examination of ideas with great candor and civility as a part of challenging and questioning and defending and responding. We must engage in the incessant pursuit of truth, which is, frustratingly, never quite fully revealed, never wholly discerned, but in fragmentary and fleeting moments sensed, hinted at, approached, approximated [9]. As my friend and colleague Dr John Tarpley says, “We do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience.” Education is all about “turning the heart and spirit so as to hear possibilities of various forms of life in which we might participate.” It “shows us details and patterns and relations which we would not have seen or heard for ourselves” [10]. The way forward can be summarized by the comments of W.B. Yeats, “Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.”

What are you looking for? Many of us, I think, are continuously trying to find and create meaningful connections. We all want to live lives that, in the end, seem to matter. How does one accomplish this? Malcolm Gladwell tells us that we should “dignify the transactions of everyday life by granting them meaning.” Above all else, we should search for what Thomas Merton calls “true self,” to become that person that we were created to be. While we tend to focus on the optimistic side and emphasize strength, ability, and accomplishment, it is necessary also to understand that there is more to it than that, and at the same time, somehow we also have to embrace the weakness, liability, and darkness as a part of who we are. We develop fear of the natural chaos of life. A broader view indicates that chaos is the precondition to creativity, it contains not just danger but also opportunity. Every creation myth relates the story that life emerged from the void [11]. It is necessary to recognize that our lives reflect loss and gain, darkness and light, struggle and joy. We should embrace it all and find in all of it opportunities for growth. Our culture prefers thinking in terms of either-or rather than delving into the complexities of paradox. In paradox opposites do not negate one another, rather they cohere in a mysterious unity at the heart of reality [12].

What is the danger involved in what we are doing? Think about the following proposition: our natural tendency is to focus on the beginning and the ending times of our lives. There is great excitement associated with a new birth, and great sorrow associated with the ending of a life. It is easy to overlook the importance of what happened during the dash between those years. It is there, within the dash, that the entire journey occurs. One cannot overlook the importance of addressing the purpose and meaning of these life events. Perhaps it was all a matter of coincidence? Consider the possibility that there are no coincidences. As T.S. Eliot says, “We had the experience but missed the meaning, and approach to the meaning restores the experience in a different form, beyond any meaning we can assign to happiness.”

If you were alone on an island, in the middle of the ocean, and you could send only one message in a bottle, what would it say? We are moved by the desire to be engaged in service. We accumulate knowledge and experience to help us in our service work. We must avoid the trap of getting caught up in the search for answers, more knowledge, more facts, to support a particular way of looking at things or to refine a certain point of view. In the midst of all that pursuit, actual helping can slip through the cracks and be overlooked. The pursuit of knowledge, skill, and experience is a worthy goal, but it is wisdom, which is defined here as understanding and professing and practicing our common humanity, that we need. By being a dedicated member of any of the helping professions we can set ourselves apart from those who need our help; this is the trap of separateness and division. This difference must be resolved, as the only real thing is helping, not the division. It is an interesting observation, and I hope one that will prove to be thought provoking, how at one moment helper and helped can be strangers, then somehow they become linked as partners on a journey involving amazingly personal and intimate moments.

Why are you here? Perhaps the question is partially answered by the pursuit of truth. Remember that in John’s Gospel we are told “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” Perhaps the question is partially answered by the pursuit of opportunities to serve others. Recall the joy of service, the privilege of rising each day to do the best we can. It is a remarkable experience to be able to participate in these sacrificial acts. One is both a gift giver and a gift receiver. It seems complicated, and difficult, yet the truth is, we get to participate in the singular grace of being an instrument of love.

Let me suggest a few summary thoughts. Be mindful of, and responsive to, your passions. Set aside time for rest, contemplation, and reflection. Prepare yourself and watch so that when the moment comes you will be well equipped and ready to respond to your calling. Keep your heart open so that love can flow in, and out. Align yourself with those who are searching for the truth. Be wary of anyone who claims to have found it. And finally, respond, over and over, to the questions that you will formulate and to this one, who do YOU say you are?

Thank you again for the great honor of serving as your president this year. I am grateful to you for this
opportunity. I am hopeful that during my time of service I have paid attention to the wisdom of the poets who for ages have taught us that office means obligation, not privilege, and that the power of office imposes not prerogative but rather responsibility. As I reflect on this process of leave taking I am reminded of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. In it he says, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Let us go forward, speaking the language and doing the work of love.

I will close with the words of W.B. Yeats: “Think where man’s glory most begins and ends, and say my glory was I had such friends.”

References
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