Preface

Every child has a hero or two growing up. Heroes can be real people or fictional ones. They help one develop specific interests and guide the growing individual, hopefully correctly, into a chosen field. I had perhaps more than my share, but each played an important, indelible role in my development.

I grew up in Brooklyn in the 1940s and 1950s. Like many a Brooklyn boy, I had my heroes. My first was Pee Wee Reese, the Brooklyn Dodger shortstop. I remember worshipping him when I would make my almost religious-like pilgrimage to the cathedral, Ebbets Field. The Dodgers had an uncanny ability to make it just so far, only to suffer crushing defeat before achieving greatness. All Dodger fans learned to accept what we received, hoping to get more, but willing to settle when we needed to. To this day, I mourn the loss of my beloved Dodgers to Los Angeles and will never forgive the Dodgers for deserting me.

I was never a big reader when growing up, but never failed to read the “funnies,” the color comic strips in the Sunday newspapers. I don’t remember much about what other papers we might have gotten at home, but I do remember the Sunday Daily News. I remember that newspaper because on the top of the first page of the funnies pages was my favorite, Dick Tracy. Each week, I devoured the mystery presented in the comic strip. The technology described in the series was sci-fi(ish) like many of the current TV shows which show criminal investigation technology that really doesn’t exist. Tracy’s critical thinking and use of intellectual curiosity was a model for my career.

I also remember lying on the floor looking up at a console radio and listening to various detective programs. My favorites included “The Shadow,” “FBI in Peace and War,” and “The Inner Sanctum.” I dreamed of being the hero and catching robbers, murderers, and others.

Our home was one of the first to have a television. This magic machine was revolutionary in providing an opportunity to “see” mysteries unfold before our eyes, in my own house! Many of the radio programs morphed onto the small screen. In addition, television presented the opportunity to educate in a way not previously able to reach into the privacy of the home.
In 1954, the first television medical show premiered. Konrad Styner, the physician host of the series played by Richard Boone, became my new hero. He introduced each one of the 51 episodes and appeared in several of them. This award-winning series introduced me to various aspects of medicine that would guide me in my path to a medical career as a poison detective. The show presented both fictional and historically based stories concerning medicine. “Who Search for Truth” was an episode which had a lasting effect on the way I approach a new problem and my attitude about grasping the moment for what it is worth. Styner presented the story of Dr. William Beaumont, an Army physician who found himself caring for Alexis St. Martin, a Canadian trapper who received a gunshot wound to his abdomen, which failed to heal. Beaumont used a non-healing gastro-cutaneous fistula as a “window” into the physiology of digestion. William Beaumont became an historic hero of mine. His ability to seize the moment and by so doing, alter the basic knowledge of human bodily function, became a model for me to emulate.

Another television program I watched regularly, almost religiously, was the police drama Dragnet, with its regular unfolding of crimes solved by a pair of Los Angeles police officers. Each week, a new case was revealed in which Sargent Jack Webb and his partner methodically solved each case by interviewing individuals for “just the facts.”

There were also a number of other programs that I “had to watch.” I was addicted to Mr. Wizard. This show, hosted by its creator Don Herbert, was first broadcast in 1951. Herbert played a science hobbyist, and every Saturday morning a neighbor boy or girl would come to visit. The children were played by child actors; oh, how I longed to be one of those visitors. Mr. Wizard always had some kind of laboratory experiment going that taught something about science. The experiments, many of which seemed impossible at first glance, were usually simple enough to be recreated by viewers, and I was always trying to recreate Mr. Wizard’s creations, often to the dismay of my family.

I also had a creative streak in my personality and loved to watch the Jon Gnagy show. Gnagy was a self-taught artist whose Learn to Draw television show taught millions of Americans how to draw with simple instructions and his “follow me” instruction. I had one of his kits and drew along with him during his regular broadcast programs. There are still times when the creative spark in me breaks out of the clinical shell and allows me to expand my horizons and look for the twists and turns that make medicine truly an art form.

My mother died when I was 11 years old. She came home from shopping one day and laid down for a nap and never woke up. I remember very little about her, only a warm nurturing feeling in my memory bank. I do remember asking her questions, either about things at school or that I wanted to know and her usual answer was “look it up.” She didn’t just ignore me though, she would ask me how I was doing solving the problem, prodding me along until I solved whatever mystery I had encountered. I also remember asking if I should do one thing or another and her advice was always, I needed to make that decision myself, but should think carefully before deciding. The years after my mother’s death consisted of me shuffling back and forth between relatives, and accompanying my father on trips to the
Catskill Mountains, with my sister and my father’s single male friends in search of entertainment and female companionship. When I was in junior high school, my father married a teacher in my future high school.

I suppose I seemed to have little or no direction in my life, and my father and new stepmother were concerned that I needed help in choosing a career. The only thing that they saw me really paying attention to was my art and photography, and my father was afraid that I would never earn a living with that, so they sent me to see the high school guidance counselor. I was given the Kuder Preference test. I had to use a stylus to punch out holes in an answer sheet that enabled a counselor to construct a picture encompassing my desires and aptitudes. After I finished the test, I was told that my responses indicated a future as either a police officer or a butler. To say the least I was a bit shaken by this. The counselor explained that I shouldn’t take the result literally, that butlers serve people’s needs and police officers were problem solvers, so that my direction could certainly be in the area of scientific investigation. Amazing how prescient the test was.

As a junior in high school I chose to be in a special theater arts-related English class. We read plays rather than books. One play that had an enormous effect on my life was Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*. The lead character in the play, Dr. Stockmann, uncovered the contamination of his town’s baths and forced their closure. He was met with resistance from others, including his brother, in his effort to prevent illness by forcing the closure and repairs. In several instances in my career, when I uncovered potentially harmful events, I was met with resistance about the disclosure. To this day, I frequently discuss how one has to stand up for what is right and to protect the innocent people rather than allow yourself to be pushed around by the money influencers.

When planning on college, I really was not given much of a choice. We didn’t have a great deal of money and the New York City colleges were essentially tuition-free (a student was responsible for a general fee of $8 per semester and an additional $10 per laboratory course for a lab fee). As I look back on my college decision, I had the opportunity to go to the local college, Brooklyn College from which my sister and stepmother had graduated, travel to the “country” and attend Queens College, or attend an urban school in the form of City College in Manhattan. Alternatively, if I really wanted to be avant-garde, Hunter College, formerly a teachers college and limited to females, had become a liberal arts college and was accepting men. By this time I was willing to state that I wanted to pursue medicine as my career. My father was not 100% supportive of this. His experiences with my mother’s death had soured him on the profession, but we didn’t fight about it. Tragically, he died during my third year in college, as with my mother, suffering a sudden, catastrophic death. I remember coming home from class and finding him in bed, a little pale and sweaty. I called one of his Masonic brothers, who was an osteopathic physician, somewhat against my father’s wishes, and told him what I saw. He was at our house very shortly thereafter. I was in the room when they spoke and the physician examined my father. As he was saying that he didn’t find anything to cause him to hospitalize my dad, my father started to grab his chest. I asked if I should leave and the physician said no, he might need me. I remembered that my dad had a small oxygen bottle
in his car as he was a dental supply salesman and this was one of the items he carried to demonstrate to his customers. I ran to get it only to return to see my father being unsuccessfully resuscitated. I can still hear the death rattle in my memory today.

As a junior in college I was preparing to apply to medical schools. Although I always seemed to be placed in advanced classes, my grades were never sterling and my GPA not spectacular. I did test well on the Medical College Aptitude Test though, the one thing I really had going for me, besides my passion to pursue a career in medicine. The premedical advisor suggested that I not get my hopes up, because I had too many strikes against me. It was well known that there was religious prejudice and it was difficult for Jewish students, like me, to gain acceptance to medical school. In addition he went on, the fact that I went to a city college and was an “orphan” suggested that there might be insufficient funds available for me to complete school without asking for a scholarship. I managed to graduate from Brooklyn College in 3½ years rather than 4 with well over the minimum credits needed. I attended classes at night and over the summer in order to complete both the required course work for my degree and to apply to medical school as well as take classes that I had an interest in. I took classes in such things as meteorology, television production, and parliamentary procedures. I also worked part-time in the registrar’s office helping with such chores as copying transcripts, helping new students register, and at times being a human computer alphabetizing registration cards. I sent applications to both allopathic and osteopathic schools. The physician Masonic friend of my father was an osteopath and he encouraged me to apply to the six osteopathic schools then in existence. I had interviews in both osteopathic and allopathic schools. I remember my very first interview, at the Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine. It was my very first airplane ride and I was terrified. I managed to get to Chicago a bit shaken but alive. I also had a bit of a problem with the hotel the night before my interview. The bed had what was called ‘magic fingers.’ You put in a quarter and were supposed to get a half hour of massage, really shaking the bed. Unfortunately after 2 hours, the darn bed was still shaking and I couldn’t fall asleep, until I found the plug and pulled it out of the electrical socket.

Most interviews consisted of both group interaction activities and individual activities. I remember the interview at the Medical College of Virginia, the school I would eventually attend. They had all of the applicants take the Miller Analogy test. This was a truly amazing experience. I was used to analogy tests from my SAT and MCAT experiences, but this was an analogy test unlike I had ever experienced. I went through the first page and broke out into a cold sweat. Many of the analogies seemed so difficult that I couldn’t figure out the answers. After struggling for a while, a pattern emerged for me, they were not simply synonyms or antonyms, etc.; the questions required deconstruction and reconstruction of words, plays on words, and so forth. Once I broke the code, the exam was a breeze, even fun. I found myself laughing out loud, to the consternation of the others who were struggling with the examination with me. Later, on returning to the premedical office and reporting the experience, I was told that Brooklyn College students rarely did well on that test, and they were surprised when they found out that I had done so well. The interview went very well at MCV and they really interested me in taking advantage of the
facilities they were developing in such areas as educational television and student involvement in research. I eventually was accepted to three allopathic and one osteopathic schools. I might have been accepted to more had I not withdrawn my applications after deciding that I wanted to go to MCV.

In June, before the start of medical school, I received a letter from MCV describing what matriculating would entail, financially and other. In addition, I received a “reading list.” It was suggested that I read the books and articles on the list. I was so overjoyed that I was accepted to the school of my choice, and so frightened that if I didn’t read the books I would offend them and would have my acceptance canceled, that I never paused to consider not reading them. I also considered the possibility that there would be a test to see if we read them. I read almost the entire list. Among the books on the list were such classics as *Arrowsmith, The Citadel, The Green Jungle*, and the book that was to become my “how to succeed in business without even trying” a guide or handbook to my medical career, Berton Roueché’s compilation of essays bound together in the book *Eleven Blue Men*.

Roueché wrote articles for the *New Yorker*. In 1944, he was hired as a writer for the magazine. In 1946, “The Annals of Medicine” series in the magazine was created for him. “The Annals of Medicine” was a series about medical detection and the fight against disease. Roueché remained a staff writer for the *New Yorker* until his death, a span of about 50 years. “Eleven Blue Men” was the story of 11 destitute men during the depression who ate at a soup kitchen in New York. Sodium nitrite, corning salt, had been substituted for table salt in making their hot cereal, producing an outbreak of methemoglobinemia, a condition in which the blood becomes cyanotic and the victim turns blue. In 1954 the book *Eleven Blue Men* was published as a compilation of many of his classic essays previously published in the *New Yorker*. An expanded version of the book was published in 1980 as *The Medical Detectives*, thought to be the inspiration behind the popular television show *House*. *The Medical Detectives* has been the muse for many public health individuals. It has taught more people about field epidemiology and the problem-solving aspect of disease investigation than any brick-and-mortar school.

My career has been a romp in the world of Medical Detectives. I have a copy of the book in my office in which I annotate cases that I have dealt with which match Roueché’s cases. When asked to organize a 6-week course for medical students in preventive medicine, there was never a hesitation in my mind as to the textbook to use; *The Medical Detectives* was selected. Amazingly, almost every person I know who has been or is involved with epidemiology, preventive medicine, or community health can recite at least chapter names of this book. It is still used in course work around the country by those pursuing degrees and hence careers in public health. I will venture a guess that if you look in the library of every health department and in the possession of every public health field worker, you will find a copy of the book.

As my career matured, and as I amassed my own library of unusual diseases, specifically poisons, I have been asked to give lectures about my experiences. I have been asked so often, “Why don’t you write a book?” that the thought crossed my mind that I could emulate the great work of Roueché and help teach the art of diagnosis to individuals in their developing years. In medical school we were always
taught that when you hear hoof beats, think horses. My philosophy has always been, yes, do think horses, but remember there might be a time when the horse is a zebra. We also attempt to teach students and residents that if they don’t think zebras, they will never know when one goes by them. In certain circumstances, failure to see the first zebra can lead to a stampede that can make many sick, or even die.

It is primarily my love of Roueché’s book, married to my personal experiences, that led to my writing these essays. I hope that the readers of this compilation are engaged, and even inspired, the way I was when I first read *The Medical Detectives*. If so, I have succeeded in my endeavors and the legacy of Roueché lives on.

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