

My mentor

The right track:

A tribute to John D. Mellinger, MD, FACS

by James G. Bittner IV, MD

Omaha, NE, is a railroad town, which ensures that it's on the right track. This city played a historic role in the triumphant westward expansion of the U.S. and, consequently, in its unprecedented national growth and prosperity. To me, John Mellinger, MD, FACS, is like Omaha, in that he represents an extraordinary station along my Iron Road to professional and personal expansion and success.

Professional growth during surgical training is imperative and best engineered by a dedicated, tireless mentor. Dr. Mellinger not only functions as the chief of the section of gastrointestinal surgery and program director of the general surgery residency at the Medical College of Georgia, but he serves an even more vital role—mentor. To his credit, he avoids merely driving everyone down the same track. Instead, individual students, residents, and faculty choose their own track as Dr. Mellinger stokes the furnace, flips the switches, and throws the brakes to ensure each ends up on the right rail for their desired destination. He conducts his mentorship with impressive enthusiasm and undeniable class while offering an unparalleled model of persistent professionalism. All the individuals who work with or around him grow into genuinely respectful and exceptionally competent surgeon physicians.

Although professional development is critical, it occurs in conjunction with significant personal maturation, a progression that should not be overlooked. Well aware of this concept, Dr. Mellinger energetically fosters the personal growth of all learners. He accomplishes this worthwhile goal through various means, including invitations to his home, participation in extracurricular activities with students and residents, team-building exercises, faith-based opportunities, and an open-door policy for professional and personal issues. In addition, resident personal development is an important point of discussion during required bi-annual review sessions. In essence, Dr. Mellinger serves as an exceptional model of professionalism but, perhaps more importantly, provides a



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genuine representation of all the best humanity has to offer.

Although benefits of mentorship are great, few are tangible; yet, Dr. Mellinger strongly believes that the finest mentors become increasingly less valuable as the learners mature and prosper. He reminds me that true mentorship is not measured by the length of the curriculum vitae but rather in humility and the reflected glory of others. Again, these are examples of wise council and deep appreciation for his primary role—that of mentor.

As I embark on my surgical journey, I recall Promontory Summit, where driving of the golden spike signified completion of the transcontinental railroad. The joining of westbound tracks from Omaha and eastbound tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad established a means for growth and prosperity. As a general surgery resident, I drive to reach my own Promontory Summit, the end of one line and the beginning of the next. Such a journey is only possible with the tireless inspiration and support of a celebrated mentor. Therefore, I feel it is imperative to pay homage to the railroad town, furnace feeder, switch operator, and brake man who provides me with a point of embarkation, a well-fed fire, and an iron-clad direction—thank you, Dr. Mellinger. I hope to be half the mentor to others that you are to me. □

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