“The Little Red Book”—Sayings of Chairman Brennan

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Good Morning. First, let me say what an honor it is to participate in this Festschrift for Murray Brennan. Not only is he a phenomenal mentor and role model for me, but I feel privileged to have him as a friend.

In my remarks, I have summarized 10 characteristics of a great leader like Murray Brennan and I will link them to common expressions that Murray has used. Those of us who have worked with Murray will no doubt recognize them. However, by compiling them into a “Little Red Book” even those of you who have not had the privilege of working with Murray Brennan will be able to now benefit from his wisdom.

Be yourself
First, be yourself—it is important to know who you are and what your limitations may be. While there is little in surgery that Dr Brennan does not know, he has no hesitation in acknowledging that he might not have the answer to a particular question. Being yourself allows you to extend yourself to others and Murray has been frequently quoted as saying, “It is not about me, it’s about all of you.” Being secure with who you are allows you to be free to focus on the needs and goals of others. Being secure allows you to promote everyone, something that Murray does frequently. At the beginning of a rotation, he promotes the medical students to interns, the interns to residents, and the fellows to attending. He then stands back and makes teaching points. This motivates everyone on the team to grow. Finally, an aphorism Murray frequently uses about oneself “It is easy to know what makes you unhappy, it is harder to figure out what makes you happy.” We all tend to dwell on the problems in our lives and do not focus enough on things that make us happy and fulfilled, an important life lesson we can all learn from Dr Brennan.

Work hard
No one can accomplish all that Dr Brennan has done without working hard. As he frequently says, however, what we all have in common are the 24 hours in the day. It is how you utilize these hours that results in accomplishing goals. Dr Brennan frequently recognizes the importance of hard work and dedication when he says “Tough times come and go, tough people don’t.” Being a cancer surgeon is not a part-time job and certainly Dr Brennan gives 110 percent all of the time. He is the first in his office in the morning and he is usually the last to leave. His administration has been one of serving others and finding solutions to problems. Speaking of problems, demonstrating ownership by saying “I did or I should have done” is something Murray frequently espouses, especially to his fellows.

Social awareness
The second characteristic of great leadership is to have social awareness; looking the part is important and nobody is more well-groomed than Dr Brennan. However, we all know what happens when he encounters a dirty, white lab coat. A good leader will be direct and tackle problems. In dealing with a person with poor interpersonal behaviors, Dr Brennan is direct and leaves no room for misinterpretation.

Take advantage of opportunities
Another important characteristic of leadership is to take advantage of opportunities. Through a chance encounter with Dr Francis D. Moore while Dr Moore was visiting New Zealand, Dr Brennan was able to secure an invitation to work in Dr Moore’s lab at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital. Once in Boston, he then impressed Dr Moore and others so much that he was able to secure a residency position there as well, something unheard of in that era. His experience at Harvard, however, led him to strive for direct, focused simple answers, not the convoluted condescending ones that were too frequent from his days of residency. Training is all about taking advantage of opportunities and certainly Dr Brennan feels that fellowship was not the end of one’s training, but actually the beginning. It is really about growth, growth that will last throughout one’s career. In fact, he has frequently been known to ask, “How can we help you grow?” Dr Brennan has continued to grow throughout his career, and no doubt continues to grow in many ways. There were not many examples of randomized prospective trials, tissue banks, and genetic diagnoses in his early years of training. These were areas in which he became a pioneer and leader as he has continued to grow and learn throughout his career. He makes learning fun for all who participate and as many of you in this room will acknowledge, the friendship and fellowship last for a lifetime.
Be organized
No one can be an outstanding leader like Dr Brennan without being extraordinarily organized. Thinking and planning ahead and working on projects in small, but consistent steps, lead to success. All of us who are not as organized remember the sign in Dr Brennan’s office. Organization can be characterized, however, in other ways; certainly in writing a grant, one must be organized, focused, and concise. Again, an area in which Dr Brennan is a master. The importance of an abstract in a grant is memorialized in one of his most famous quotations. Organizing the background, goals, and future directions in a concise abstract can sell the grant as well as educate the reader. Organization is also important in administration, even in practical things such as establishment of authorship. Again, thinking and planning ahead will avoid problems and expedite reaching one’s goals.

Stay focused
Good leaders must stay focused on the issues at hand. In clinical medicine and in administration, it is easy sometimes to miss the forest for the trees. Dr Brennan has a laser beam ability to focus on the important issue and separate the wheat from the chaff. This leads him to encourage people to be less tentative and more definitive in their decision making. This ability to focus is never more evident than when Dr Brennan listens to a talk and says the following words to the presenter, “I have one question about your first conclusion,” or “Can you just show me that first graph.” Giving one’s full attention and continuously challenging the assumptions of the presenter not only keeps the presenter on his or her toes, but serves to educate everyone in the room.

Mentoring
No outstanding leader attains success without a mentor. Dr Brennan was frequently quoted in saying “Mentors are important, bring one or find one.” Even Dr Brennan had mentors such as Dr Moore at the Brigham. Mentoring is all about identifying what is best for the mentee. It is also about asking the right question. Mentors are also great role models and there are none better than Dr Brennan. In fact, he has been a mentor and role model for a generation of surgical oncology fellows and young faculty. He has a marvelous way of involving the mentee in his daily life. One example is how he involves mentees in clinical trials, something Dr Brennan has espoused throughout his career.

Lead the troops into battle
“A good chief leads the troops into battle.” By that I mean a good leader should lead by example. Dr Brennan has always been one of the busiest surgeons on the staff and is technically superb. He has not had an occasional grant, he has had continuous NIH funding for decades and several program project grants. He doesn’t just publish, he publishes scholarly manuscripts in consistently top-tier journals and uses those manuscripts to train fellows and young faculty about many of the attributes that I have already mentioned. A good leader, therefore, has an appreciation for what the troops are going through and what it takes for the troops to be successful. Finally, a good leader will have empathy with his troops and especially with his patients.

Life-long learning experience
Great leaders, like Dr Brennan, make their career a life-long learning experience. Before a talk, Dr Brennan frequently asks, “What are you hoping to learn?” After the talk, he then asks what was learned and how many of us have heard him frequently admonish us to learn one thing every day. The fellows know this well because Dr Brennan is frequently quoted as telling them, “this is not an academic finishing school,” but a place to teach you how to grow throughout your career. Only through life-long learning will we be able to make progress and understand the intricacies of how cancers develop and how the patients may be more effectively treated. One mark of a great leader is to make every experience an opportunity for learning. By continually challenging ourselves, we acquire new knowledge and are more likely to open our minds to new ideas and paradigms, something that Dr Brennan has ably demonstrated over his career.

The heart is just as important as the brain
Finally, in leadership the heart is just as important as the brain. Leadership is all about being fair, having good communication and having control of one’s emotions. One’s reputation depends on how one handles the person or people you do not like. Again, objectivity and careful analysis are hallmarks of a good leader, but sometimes we just need to be reminded to do what is right.

In summary, we have in front of us today a true example of an outstanding leader. He fully demonstrates all of the characteristics of leadership one could delineate. More importantly, however, for all of us who have been fortunate to be a part of Dr Brennan’s life, we recognize through these many aphorisms that he has been exhorting us to become leaders as well. Not necessarily that all of us should be chairpersons, but that we should lead in whatever facet of our profession we choose. Ladies and gentlemen, by following the Little Red Book of Chairman Brennan, we will all become better as physicians, leaders, and as human beings. By following the Little Red Book, we will propagate the life-long learning experience and make surgery a much better place for our trainees and for our patients. This is the legacy of Dr Murray Brennan.