

## **Eulogy for George Ridgeway Minor**

Thank you all, Dr. George Minor's family and friends, for being here to celebrate his wonderful, loving and giving life.

His passing marks the loss of a remarkable man -- a deeply compassionate and highly principled man to all who were privileged to have known him.

The first-born son of Hugh and Lillie Minor, George was born on October 18, 1913 in Cannel City, a coal town in central Kentucky where his father was employed as the treasurer of the Cannel City Black Coal Company. He attended college at the University of Arizona and graduated from the Medical School of the University of Virginia in 1940, where he served as a Professor of Thoracic Surgery, Assistant Dean of the Medical School and Chief Surgeon of the Department of Thoracic Surgery. He served the University he loved for 45 years, not taking full retirement until he was in his 80s. A few years ago, Dr. Minor gave me his personal journals and correspondence and asked that I write his memoir.

### *Early Life & Tribulations*

Dr. Minor's character was formed through a series of ordeals that would have crushed a less resilient boy. He was stricken with tuberculosis at age 2 and lost his beloved mother, Lillie Faulkner Minor, when he was 12 years old.

In a letter, dated February 24, 1916, Hugh Minor wrote to a physician in Lexington, Kentucky:

“The writer is much concerned as to his 2 and ½ year old boy, George. For the past year he has been troubled with a slight lameness in his left hip or knee; at times he would go for two or three months without the slightest limp, and then without warning he would show up lame....”

Some months later, George's mother took him by train to see a specialist in Cincinnati, a doctor named Albert Freiberg. Dr. Freiberg correctly diagnosed

George with tuberculosis of the bone and treated him successfully, enabling him to walk without difficulty.

Shortly following the death of his mother, George's poem "Reveries" appeared in the *Cincinnati Post*:

"Up in the heavens above,  
Down in the earth below,  
I sat and wondered what was love  
In the dim ages.

You may take it all in all,  
And I suppose its much the same,  
Anywhere that you may go,  
Love has the same meaning and name ...

Its devotion is supreme,  
Its self-sacrifice is grand.  
And it always plays the part  
Of a loving guiding hand...."

Dr. Minor, a supremely gifted and compassionate man, understood human suffering on a level that few among us can ever understand, yet he never faltered, never gave up, always did his best to make the most of his own life and to enrich the lives of those around him. It has been written that "gold is tried in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of adversity." Those words apply perfectly to Dr. George Minor.

Yet it must be remembered that he was descended from a great family. They came to Virginia in Colonial times and established a large estate in Albemarle County in the early 1800's. Dr. Minor's paternal grandfather and namesake, George Ridgeway Minor, served with great distinction during the War Between the States. In a condolence letter to Hugh Minor upon the death of his father, written on December 27, 1910, his war comrade, Hunter Powell, wrote:

"The Confederacy had no braver or truer man in its army ranks than was George Minor. He was I believe the most robust and hardiest soldier in

our company, rarely ever missed a fight on account of sickness or a worn out horse. If I am not in error he rode one horse throughout the war, a tough rich bay, Morgan, that never gave out, following the example of his master. During that same period I had thirty horses.”

Dr. Minor was also blessed with a most kind and gentle father, Hugh.

Writing in his pocket *Record Book* in 1896, Hugh Minor listed “A few Rules to be Observed,” *e.g.*,

- ◆ Be uniformly courteous to all
- ◆ What is worth doing at all is worth doing well
- ◆ If you cannot speak well of others keep silent, and
- ◆ Cultivate a cheerful disposition; a smiling face is the sunshine of the soul.

Hugh and Lillie Minor provided the “loving guiding hand” that enabled Dr. Minor to overcome all obstacles and become the great man that he was.

#### *A Life of Learning & Adventure*

Socrates, the great philosopher, was sentenced to death for encouraging his students to challenge the accepted beliefs of the time and think for themselves. At his trial for heresy, Socrates told the court: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” George Minor was a modern-day Socrates. His passion for reading was a means of instruction in human nature, his sense of history a practical guide for navigating a fascinating but often troubled world.

Writing from a hospital bed at the University of Michigan in 1946, where he again contracted tuberculosis, Dr. Minor amused himself by describing his friend, Esme, a tiny green lizard:

“Late in June a visitor brought me a tiny green lizard of the type known in circuses as chameleons...He seems rarely inclined to escape from the window screen which is his home, but he obviously enjoys trailing through the leafy stems of a vase of flowers. We have grown quite attached to him

and now feel, as parents are prone to do about an infant, that he has a definite personality (though we cannot think of anyone he resembles) and I have spent hours observing his periods of somnolent immobility, his skittering gait, his food habits, color vagaries and pert lizardly ways.”

His December 19, 1946 entry in the same hospital journal reads:

“Apparently one is not safe from Christmas Carols either within or without. Radios croon them up and down the hall, while outside tonight a group of college girls sing very spiritedly in two parts all the good old carols: *Silent Night, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, O Little Town of Bethlehem, Noel, Joy to the World, God Rest ye*, and all the rest. My memory cannot quite carry me back to those bright scenes in church and school when I once joined in so lustily, but I feel suffused with obscure sentiment and hum the baritone or bass as accompaniment until my eyes grow moist and I begin to yawn. In the observatory yard a tall fir has been dressed with lights and glows in the darkness now, an invisible slender cone marked out by points of colored light.”

Dr. Minor was intensely interested in the world and went as far and fast as life would take him to see and experience its marvels and understand its people. In 1972, following a near fatal car accident in Rumania, he embarked upon his greatest adventure: a two year sojourn in Tunisia as an exchange professor with Project Hope, a program in which Dr. Minor trained Tunisian and French doctors at the Hospital Charles Nicolle in the latest methods of thoracic surgery.

Dr. Minor lived in a large white stucco house by the Mediterranean Sea in a small Arab suburb of Tunis, a city which he described as a “fairy-tale place like some imaginative but unlikely combination of Paris and Bagdad.” “Young women,” he wrote to a friend, “are often lovely with complexions that range from ivory through apricot to chocolate and their kohl-shaded black eyes dance mischievously.”

On the day of his departure from Tunisia (June 28, 1974) he wrote in his journal:

“The inner table of the back of my skull is imprinted with hundreds of kodachrome transparencies of Tunisia, to be viewed at will until the

synapses fade. All I need to do is close my eyes and summon them up .... Among these views are the lilac mountains of the interior, the pewter 'stagnum' or lake of Tunis, the sugar cube houses of Gammarth and Sidi Bou Said, the shaded garden of my own villa, the aquamarine and indigo of the Mediterranean, the creamy foam of braking waves on the beach at Raouad, the steel-colored sea on a windy day covered with whitecaps off La Marsa, the souks of Tunis, Hammamet and Gafsa, the Bled, the desolate Chott Djerid with its chaplet of oases."

Dr. Minor returned to Charlottesville and the Medical School, where his devotion to his work, his enthusiasm for teaching, and his ethics made him one of the leading thoracic surgeons of his time, and one of the most revered physicians ever associated with the University of Virginia.

#### *Last Train to Paradise*

Dr. Minor grew up loving trains and rode on them gleefully all over the world. The rise of his hometown owed a great deal to the coming of a train, the Arkansas and Kentucky Railroad (or "Roarin K" as it was called), and thus made possible his father's livelihood as treasurer of a coal company. Another train took him to see a doctor in Cincinnati who saved his life. Another conveyed him to Virginia where he spent the halcyon days of summer with his father's family in Albemarle County.

Little wonder that, as he lay dying a month ago, Dr. Minor invoked the image of a train to take him on his final journey, the last train to paradise. He asked several times if he was ready to go on the train and wanted most urgently not to be late. My wife, Barbara, and faithful members of his household staff (Frances Hoke, Clara Bowles and Joyce Jones) were always by his side to encourage him to take nourishment and reassure him that none of us would let him miss the train. Dr. Minor boarded his train on Thursday, November 29 at 7:30 a.m., in the sunshine of a new day. You could hear the whistle blowing as the train left the

station and picked up speed, crossed over the hills of the Piedmont, and ran full-speed ahead into the flatlands. One could see George smiling, his body completely at ease and his mind aglow in ecstasy as he contemplated meeting up again with dear departed friends and family.

Late on the morning of his passing, a dear lady, Josephine Marshall, came to Dr. Minor's home bearing white roses. They first met at the Blue Ridge Sanatorium when Jo was an aspiring nurse and George a 24-year old medical student. Tears welled up in her eyes as Jo described a dashing handsome and charming young medical student who was always so polite and considerate of others. But they were happy tears because Jo understood, as all of us here do today, that Dr. Minor was on a train bound for glory.

Dr. Minor loved each and every one of you and his love is his greatest legacy. So let us go forth from this beautiful Chapel with a song in our hearts as we remember that his life was a blessing and his love will never die. Just close your eyes and you will see him smiling and feel his hand holding yours.

*-Roger A. Stetter  
New Orleans, La.  
22 December 07*