

Cogbill Tribute

Good afternoon members, guests, friends. Yes, friends. For that is what the WTA has meant since it was established, and that is how Tom Cogbill thought about all of us in the Western Trauma Association. Tom passed away peacefully in his home, with his family present, this past New Year's Eve.

Gene Moore brought Tom to his first meeting in 1982, at which he presented a paper on pancreatic trauma. Tom had an incessant thirst to answer a single question. WHY. That question caused him continual trouble during his pre-college education. He could not accept tenets without an answer as to why they were true. That inquisitive nature drove his clinical research. Realizing that he needed additional clinical data for questions and procedures he was exploring, he asked members of the WTA interested in the same issue to combine their data with his. That became the standing Multi-Center Trials Committee of today. He chaired that committee for thirteen years. Tom was the lead investigator on four major trials on diverse trauma topics, including a 1989 paper on non-operative management of splenic injuries, which was seminal in changing the management of splenic trauma. Tom became a member of the Board of Directors of the WTA, arranged for CME to be given for the annual meeting, and was elected President for the 1995-1996 year. This culminated in an epic annual meeting in Grand Targhee. Epic because of its relatively spartan accommodations, cramped meeting space, and great skiing. By putting us all in such close quarters we became closer to one another personally. He was the first President to hold a thank you dinner for the WTA Board of Directors, who supported him during his presidential year. We, as an organization, became bonded, more interested in each other, and made more lasting relationships. This gave rise to David Livingston's accurate statement that we were a "Fellowship of the Snow".

Tom practiced at the Gundersen Clinic in La Crosse, Wisconsin his entire career, a non-University rural setting, far different from the academicians. He was the General Surgery Residency program director for 20 years, graduating three outstanding surgeons annually. He applied for an at large position to be a director for the American Board of Surgery, even though, with typical humility, he felt that he wasn't "worthy" enough to be on the Board. It was Dave Feliciano who rebutted each of his concerns, and Tom became a director. In his last year of six on the Board, he was elected Chair of the ABS. Tom also chaired the Educational Milestones in Surgery Committee of the ABS which developed the Milestones checklist for surgical residents, currently used today.

It would not surprise me if most of you know little or nothing about these contributions, because Tom never touted them. This was "service", to which he was committed, and emblematic of his humility. Not only was he humble, but he was also self-effacing.

Tom's greatest passion was his family, and he was a model husband and father. He married his wife, Jan, in 1977 and they had three children, Andy, Chris, and Allison. Tom instilled in them the values of family, caring for each other, and looking out for others, values that guided him

throughout his life, and were seen by all who observed him here at the WTA. The WTA was part of his extended family. His warmth, humor, and fellowship lit up every room, and every person in it. He had an existential love of Nature, and once described to a friend that being in the mountains was a spiritual, *transcendent* experience that brought him peace. He and Jan would split their time between Cable, Wisconsin, an idyllic location by the lake that he and Jan loved, and Driggs, Idaho where they built a log house with a beautiful view of the Tetons. These locations were his sanctuary. Tom was a very spiritual person, and Nature gave him peace, solace, inspiration, comfort, and a sense of oneness with the world. The love and the joy he received from Nature drove his constant activities. He loved going on hikes with his family, as recently as this past October, climbing the Tetons and camping. He constantly rode his mountain bike, ran, and swam. He was an excellent alpine, and an avid Nordic skier. He raced in the annual Birkebeiner 50 Kilometer cross country ski race 32 times in Cable, and twice in Norway. Tom completed 25 marathons and competed in two Ironman competitions. Tom also kept a ledger, accurately logging the distance of each run. By his calculation, he had run two circumnavigations of the globe! His family were all blessed to spend the time after Christmas this year with Tom in Cable.

At the meetings, his remarks were always cogent, appropriate, and respectful. His input was sought, and his demeanor in the meeting room was a guide for all of us. His humility, kindness, humor, smile and laugh set a benchmark for us in the WTA.

Steve Shackford aptly stated that the final stanza of Rudyard Kipling's poem "IF" could have been written about Tom:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,

If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

Our friend Tom was such a man.

While there is no doubt that the WTA, and the world, is a little colder and less bright now that Tom's warmth and brilliant light no longer shines, it is equally true that the WTA and the world are improved beyond measure because of Tom's life, well lived.

Delivered by Barry C. Esrig, MD, March 7, 2023.