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Remarks by Robert Marshak at the Memorial for Charles W. Raker

Robert R. Marshak, University of Pennsylvania
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at the “Celebration of Life” Memorial for
Charles W. Raker
University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine
New Bolton Center
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I feel honored to be invited to share with you a few treasured memories of Charlie Raker, memories collected over a span nearly six decades. I still marvel at the rare conjunction of circumstances that propelled Charlie and me, almost simultaneously, from our similar large animal practices, to become colleagues in academia at a transformative moment in the history of veterinary medical education. It was a time when the School’s very existence hung in the balance by the slenderest thread – New Bolton Center, recently purchased, was more dream than reality, and the antediluvian OLD Quad in West Philadelphia was bulging at the seams. It contained within its walls the entire Veterinary School operation: large and small animal hospitals, teaching and research space, and the faculty and student body. This was the situation I encountered when I came to Penn in 1956 as the new professor of medicine.

I first met Charlie hard at work in the improbable setting of the OLD Quad’s courtyard. — trucks and trailers and vans were unloading or reloading horses and cows - grooms and students were exercising horses and dogs around the OLD Quad’s grassless oval - a scene worthy of a Bruegel Painting. The operating theater was a cavernous room with stocks and a monstrous hydraulic table. From overhead, a massive black box, the dinosaur of x-ray machines, peered down from the high fractured ceiling. A red-tiled clinic hall with soak stalls and casting mats was the main large animal teaching and treatment area.

Apparently unperturbed by this feverish environment, Charlie could be observed moving, always at a very fast-clip, between the OR, stable, office, lecture hall, and conference rooms - operating, teaching, consulting, writing, attending meetings - he was study in focused motion.
Before long I came to appreciate that Charlie’s stamina was matched by an exceptional and creative surgical talent, a keen intellect, and a strong aversion to sloth and procrastination. He had the ability to think fast and also to think slow, a characteristic common to gifted and intuitive clinicians. And, as many here today will confirm, Charlie was a rare and remarkable teacher and mentor. Penn was thus blessed with an extraordinary leader whose devotion to the School was deeper than any personal issue.

It is a grand testament to Charlie that in the first decade of the Raker era, despite such primitive working conditions, the scope, quality and success-rate of equine surgery at Penn improved remarkably and our Old Quad began to attract top quality horses. The waiting list for elective surgery grew unmanageably long. When Tim Tam and other famous race horses were patients the press gave the school priceless public exposure.

Then in 1964, when the large animal hospital at New Bolton Center opened its doors, Charlie moved there to take charge of the equine service – at last, Charlie and his facilities were appropriately matched and, during the following years, equine surgery awakened fully from a long quiescence and reached the high standard of canine and human surgery as an academic discipline. In the process, Penn earned a reputation as the favored place to bring a sick or injured equine patient. The magnitude of change in the sweep and sophistication of horse surgery at Penn, during those historic years, attracted surgeons, trainees, and observers from all over the world. And the seeds that Charlie and his great colleague Jacques Jenny were planting began to produce a luxuriant foliage.

Owing to his contributions as an equine surgeon and mentor, Charlie and his colleagues brought to the School a measure of fame and
fortune that helped alter dramatically our chances of realizing some wildly ambitious goals: financial stability, physical plant development, and most importantly altering the direction of veterinary clinical education - from a largely vocational mode to a science-based, intensely intellectual endeavor that included sophisticated research and the development of a broad range of authentic clinical specialties.

Catalyzed by the strong bonds Charlie had forged with our alumni and clientele, our dean, Mark Allam, a man who had the capacity to charm a Tasmanian Devil, seized the opportunity to marshal the diverse equine community to support the work that New Bolton Center was doing to advance equine medicine and surgery. Harrisburg, impressed by broad private sector support, then saw fit to increase substantially the School’s Commonwealth appropriation allowing continual expansion of our clinical and research endeavors.

During our working years, my personal interactions with Charlie were always very warm, but far too infrequent – we were both too busy in our own spheres. A serious, quiet, reserved, and very private person, Charlie was the only member of the faculty during my tenure as his Department Chairman and Dean, who never asked for anything except approval of his proposed faculty appointments and promotions. In turn, with total confidence in Charlie’s judgment and leadership I never interfered with his decisions and activities.

At the beginning of our relationship in the Old Quad it was obvious to me that Charlie and I were on the same page in terms of departmental direction and initiatives. But at the naive age of 33, I was eager to sweep away everything standing between me and the goals I had set for the Department. Sensing danger, Charlie took me aside one day, and after reaffirming his support for my plans delivered his real
message – that for me the 3 most important words in the English language should be “wait a minute.” I knew he was right, was much better for it, and as you can see, I’m still standing.

Finally, it was during our retirement years, even as we met infrequently, that Charlie and I experienced the radiance and tenderness of a close friendship. There were memories that only we two were left to share. I sensed that he understood and took great pleasure in how grand and everlasting his legacy would be. An iconic figure in his specialty and his profession, universally revered by colleagues and students, he never stopped giving, establishing in 1998 the Raker Opportunity Scholarship Fund with its unique mentoring component. It was in this connection that I saw Charlie for the very last time. At a school function, I found him surrounded by a half dozen adoring Raker Scholarship recipients, beaming from ear to ear. At that near-final moment of his life I was inclined to believe that Charlie Raker was as happy as any man on earth could be.