A Tribute to Charles W. Raker

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By Robert R. Marshak

October 4, 1985
Arnold Schönberg, in an essay on Gustav Mahler, wrote that nothing about a great man is irrelevant.

Tonight, as we continue a day-long tribute to our great colleague, Charles Raker, I have some good words to share with you. They are personal impressions, collected and refined over a span of 30 years, of this man and of his contributions.

His professional and academic achievements are well known to most of you—how, in advancing equine surgery, he put his indelible mark on the style and substance of that discipline throughout the world. Those of you who are surgeons have more direct knowledge than I do of his major contributions. I do know, however, that he transformed the lives and the outlook of many of you who came under his wise and life-giving influence, while he taught all of us something about the awesome and enormous potential power of good doctoring. The pace of progress during the 3 decades of his leadership at the School has been measured and majestic.

But getting to know Charles Raker—the inner man—that is still another matter. For most of us it would be easier to infiltrate the Pentagon or perhaps even the Kremlin. He has chosen to live his life within the frontiers of a deliberately circumscribed world. Yet, tonight, I hope with his forbearance, I dare to penetrate that world to share with you my personal impressions of the inner man.

Charles Raker. The word integrity might have been invented for him. His scrupulous regard for the truth, the shining impartiality of his judgment, his independence, have been a unique moral asset to the Veterinary School for more than 30 years.

He has never been a man to spend time reflecting about other people's attitudes or feelings towards him, and this goes with his freedom from preoccupation with his own personality or status. He has no ambition to defeat rivals or to
proselytize. In a sense, he lives behind doors that few are permitted to enter, but his gifts, his distinction as a surgeon, still more his uncompromising principles and his strength of character, made him a natural leader. Yet with all his pride, his talent, his fastidious intellect, he is a kind and affectionate man and he is capable of moments of marvelous gaiety and high spirits. I have always admired his disciplined habits, his professionalism, and his belief in and capacity for hard, methodical work in which much of his days are spent.

Over the years, he was a willing servant of self-imposed obligations and in consequence, often wore himself out by his devotion to his work and to his students. But he was not dulled by this stern self-discipline. He needed and was sustained by the vitality of others and despite his careful judgment and sense of measure, he welcomed eagerly his gifted students and colleagues, however extravagant or eccentric some of them were.

He is one of the most admired and looked-up-to teachers of his generation. To his students he is a conscientious, acute, sympathetic, and stimulating teacher. He never allowed himself to intimidate or pillory the weaker among them, or to ignore them, or to treat them with disdain. He disliked only the idle and the fraudulent. Those who displayed exceptional gifts found the most sensitive understanding and wide encouragement.

He is attached to his students and follows their subsequent careers with great interest and sympathy. He has never sought to dominate, or to bask in easily acquired worship. He fosters thoroughness and application. He wishes to make his own views entirely clear to others and to grasp theirs as fairly and accurately as possible. What he likes above all is a combination of imaginative ideas and practical knowledge. When he lectures, there appears to be nothing between him and the
subject of his exposition or criticism. There are never any rhetorical tricks or
vagueness or nervous confusion. In clinical rounds, he speaks his mind with candor
and precision and with the great natural courtesy that is an essential attribute
of his character. He does not speak, however, unless he has something of central
relevance to say or to ask. His motives are so completely free of calculation,
his sincerity is so evident, that his apparently simple statements or questions,
penetrating as they often do to the heart of some debated issue, tend to have a
major impact. His words are listened to with deep respect and he is never pedantic
or nigling. If criticisms appear to him to have an element of justice, he acknowledges them fully and alters his views. He is a just man who has made his example
and his influence dominant in his generation.

Finally, in the inner citadel of his personal life, he remains self-sufficient,
untouched and proudly independent. The recollection that will remain in my mind
for the rest of my days is that of a wholly civilized, good and scrupulous man—
a man of the greatest imaginable distinction.

When I think of Charlie Raker, like Hamlet, I stand amazed at what a piece of
work is man.