

Louis A. Black, M.D.: Why he was great (A kid's perspective)

In the summer of 1965, I had the privilege of becoming a part of Dr. Black's family for three months. Sometime before, during or after that time (probably before) I came to the conclusion that he was a great person—near the top of the list of truly great people I've met in life—and now, nearly forty years later, I'm sitting at my keyboard upon the news of his death to ask myself why. What was it about him that brought me to this conclusion?

In reflecting on Dr. Black, I began with his handsome face, his beautiful blue Paul Newman reminiscent eyes, his stature, his physical presence—the smell of his cherry blend pipe tobacco wafting throughout the room, as he used to work in his home office. I thought of his immense intelligence, the joy of being in the presence of and conversing with a mind that thought so insightfully and with such precision.

Then I thought, those things are true, but that's not what made him great. Those were gifts from the Almighty and we're all great in that sense.

Then I thought of his family, the warmth in his household—the love, the nurturing, the informed conversation and the discipline of sorts. Dr. Black had somehow managed to convince his kids that he always knew what they were up to—day or night, near or far, good or bad. He used this apparent knowledge to influence their behavior without saying a word—a true stroke of genius.

This was close, but I knew then and know now a lot of families in Kenton which enjoyed similar contentment and functionality. Still not it.

I had to reflect on the issue of wealth, as I know from life's experience that there are people who see a modicum of wealth and go, "Wow! Isn't he or she important?"

I don't buy that and when I think of his standard of living, it was modest relative to his means.

Finally, I came to it. Here's what I think made him great:

It was his response to calls at all hours of the day or night from people who needed help. It wasn't just for medical problems, but for all aspects of life. I knew from my own personal observation people he had helped adopt children, get into medical school, receive counsel, when they needed it on subjects from sex to morality, from work to achievement, from resolution of conflicts to pain of all types. I heard him pick up the phone to counsel the sick and the dying. I saw in his eyes both the sadness and the glow of heartfelt compassion.

I remember him sharing, years after he had finished medical school how he had been required by virtue of a job he had to accept to earn money, while going to medical school at Ohio State that he was instrumental in conducting experiments on dogs and

having to put them to sleep at the conclusion. He shared the anguish of how badly he felt about their ordeal, their plight and the extent to which he still carried, years later, feelings of guilt and sadness, when he reflected on it.

If that's how he felt about the dogs, I often thought, how must he feel about his patients?

To me, personally, he was a great friend, as I'm sure he was to many. I was a teenager, when I lived in his home and, as teenagers are wont to do, I was often a jerk in terms of my behavior. But, he wasn't as critical of me as I thought he should have been. Instead, he seemed to draw a larger frame around the overall picture of who I was, put whatever incident had taken place into a broader perspective and conclude that whatever had happened had been inconsequential. He always gave me the impression that he expected great things of me.

The ordinary human response, I've come to realize, when others, especially nurturing parents or friends, expect something of you, is to do your best to respond in a way that approaches their expectations. I've carried his confidence in me and my capabilities throughout my life as a means of facing adversity and attempting to reach my ultimate potential. In a sense he is now and for all these years has been an integral part of me that I've held within my heart. I will always continue to do so. It's like I have my own little piece of him that keeps me going and attests to his own immortality.

I'm certain that I'm just one of many people who've had this same experience in various ways and to varying degrees. I was one of the truly lucky people who got a bird's eye view of his greatness. He was a profound example to all and an inspiration to those of us who had the privilege and good fortune to know him best.

In the end, I'm told, he had to leave Ohio, largely due to declining health, but there's another reason that I know which many don't. It was because his heart was so big that it could no longer be confined to Ohio. He had a heart the size of Kansas.

I think it's instructive of who he was that he took the state cardiology boards in mid-career as a practicing physician, not because he had to, because he had already passed them. He took them so it would force him to make certain that he was up to date with the latest developments and technology. In doing so, he remained as competent as ever. He passed the test with an extraordinary score, near the top of the statewide applicants.

Yesterday, I was saddened to hear the news that Louis A. Black, M.D., a cardiologist, my friend, a father, a husband, a philanthropist in every sense of the word, had passed from our midst. His heart that would not fit into an entire state had sadly and irrevocably stopped beating. His loss, as I can attest from my own home office here in California, is felt around the country and, as I strongly suspect, the world, as well.