



Howard Ulfelder



Howard Ulfelder was born in Mexico City in 1911 to American parents; his father was a fledging physician from New York, and his mother was a nurse from Galesburg. He grew up with his three siblings downtown, in the shadow of the Regis Hotel, where his father had established what was to become a very successful practice of medicine that spanned some 60 years. Howard must have been an agile and lively boy, giving his mother, who was becoming increasingly deaf, somewhat more than the usual boyhood problems. He later recounted how he and his friends would plan “beeline hikes” in Mexico City. This meant proceeding on an absolutely straight compass direction, scaling any obstacle, such as a tall building, that might be faced along the way. There was no parental permission, of course, and, in fact, the parents were never aware of this activity.

Already fluent in Spanish, which was to remain a lifelong asset in this career, Howard also acquired competence in German as a result of early education at the German School in Mexico City. He came to Phillips Exeter Academy in New England for his further education. At about the time of this transition. At about the time of this transition, he contracted tonsillitis. Not long thereafter, he awoke one morning with back pain so severe that he fell to the floor as he got out of bed. This was on the onset of the ankylosing spondylitis that invalidated him for a period of time in 1936, just as he was beginning his internship, and plagued him for the rest of his life.

Following Exeter, he attended Harvard College, graduating in 1932, and Harvard Medical School, graduating in 1936. His education was completed by the full tour of internship and residency in general surgery at Massachusetts General Hospital. His introduction to clinical medicine was in Mexico City under the tutelage of his father. He related how once, when making rounds with his father at the American hospital in Mexico City, he examined one of his father’s patients, who immediately remarked that Howard did not hurt him as much as his father had in performing the same examination. His father’s response was, “Yes, but he didn’t feel as much either.”

Howard met his wife, Ethel, as an undergraduate at Harvard. Her impact was accompanied by a precipitous decline in his academic standing, and this, plus their remoteness from their families—his in Mexico City and hers in Bath, Maine—led to consternation and confusion in both locations. This was resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned when the young couple simply eloped, and Howard successfully applied to, and entered, Harvard Medical School in the class of 1936. The marriage resulted in the births of four fine boys, judiciously spaced at intervals of seven years—Howard, John, Bill and Tom. When you entered the Ulfelders' home you could see at once how these boys would have looked had they been quadruplets. All four were represented in the hallway in photographs showing them at age 12 or so—four young, glowing faces, a blend of both parents.

Howard left MGH with the 6th General Hospital Unit in 1942, leaving that unit shortly thereafter to serve from 1942 to 1945 as chief of surgery of the 55th General Hospital in England, and later in France. He was mustered out of the army in 1946, and returned to Boston to begin his distinguished career in science and medicine by joining Joe V. Meigs.

Dr. Meigs became associated with MGH in 1939 as chief of Vincent Memorial Hospital when the latter, until then a freestanding institution with its own building, became a part of the MGH complex. Before that time, gynecological patients at the MGH were treated along with other female surgical patients, but when Vincent Memorial Hospital joined MGH, they had their own hospital-within-a-hospital, and not too long thereafter, their own building. Its cornerstone was laid in 1946, coincidentally with Howard Ulfelder's arrival.

Gynecological oncology, in today's nomenclature, was the central concern of Joe Meigs' extraordinarily busy private practice of gynecology, but the variety of his cases also ranged broadly over the entire field. In addition, George N. Papanicolaou had only recently published his successes with the cytologic method for the early detection of cancer of the cervix. The major importance of this discovery was promptly recognized at MGH by an internist, Maurice Fremont-Smith, who learned the technique and brought it to the first Vincent Research Laboratory in 1943. Dr. Meigs championed it, and Howard Ulfelder learned it, along with the early technicians, notably Ruth M. Graham, who taught it widely. As might be expected, clinical diagnosis of cancer using the Papanicolaou technique was the subject of more than one of Dr. Ulfelder's early publications. At that time, the relative roles of surgery and radiotherapy were being intensively evaluated in the treatment of cervical cancer, and cytologic changes noted by Graham were considered to be useful as an early indication of responsiveness to radiotherapy.

It was a magnificent opportunity for Dr. Ulfelder—working with Langdon Parsons as well as Joe Meigs, and later, with Francis M. Ingersoll and Thomas H. Green—to be one of the pioneers in applying the principles and techniques of cancer surgery, developed in general surgery, to the surgery of cancer in the female pelvis and external genitalia. A direct product of this experience was the masterful "Atlas of Pelvic Operations" prepared by Drs. Parson and Ulfelder, first published in 1953, and republished in much expanded form in 1968. The atlas is still an important resource for trainees in gynecology and

oncology.

In his humble way, Dr. Ulfelder always acknowledged the preeminent genius of Joe B. Meigs. Characteristically, he also recognized that the patient with cancer requires a fully interdisciplinary approach to her problem. He collaborated with Rita M. Kelley in pioneering efforts in medical oncology, and with Milford D. Schulz, Chiu-Chen Wang, and later, Herman D. Suit, in working for increasingly effective applications of radiotherapy.

In 1955, Dr. Ulfelder succeeded Dr. Meigs as chief of Vincent Memorial Hospital, and in 1962, he was named the first Joe. V. Meigs Professor of Gynecology at Harvard Medical School.

Howard Ulfelder had several outstanding traits of personality and character: affection, optimism, rationalistic intellect, artistry, political sagacity, courage, humor, and, above all, caring. Many were supported, taught, helped or cured by his kindness.

His love of the reasonable and rational made him an admirer of Albert J. Nock's quirky conservative "Memoirs of a Superfluous Man." From it he drew upon and applied two central themes: First, that people will not respond to externally applied goals, but only to those that fulfill their needs. And second, that it should be our business not to try to reform the world, but to try, if we can, to contribute a single improved unit to it, even if that unit is only ourselves. He responded in characteristic fashion to the concerns of John W. Grover, then a young attending, about the tragic social problem of teenage pregnancy. He advised, "Just think about it a lot, John, before you do anything."

Another illustration of his character and insight was his strong support of Ann Brace Barnes, who was one of the first female surgical residents trained at MGH. She subsequently trained in obstetrics and gynecology. In 1967, Dr. Ulfelder appointed her as the first female obstetrician-gynecologist to join the Vincent-MGH staff.

It was a marvel to Dr. Ulfelder's colleagues that he could sit through interminable meetings, listening to a great deal of nonsense, and make no comment until the nonsense had fallen of its own weight. He would then pick up the pieces, summarize, and bring the meeting to a fruitful close. As his colleague Saul Gusberg put it, "He was extraordinarily articulate—every sentence of his was a summary."

His artistry was expressed in many ways: in his study of Japanese painting, for which he acquired the art of using the brush in the Japanese manner; in his extraordinary neatness—the fact that his desk was always clear; and in his attention to the architectural details of buildings at MGH, notably the Cox Cancer Center. The Vincent Show, an all-female extravaganza of song and dance performed for the benefit of Vincent Memorial Hospital, was always attended by the Ulfelders with enthusiasm, and with the knowledge on the part of Duxbury neighbors that Howard Ulfelder was himself a talented song-and-dance man.

His rationalistic intelligence, artistry and caring all found expression in the way he performed and taught surgery. Many fine touches in the “Atlas of Pelvic Operations” exhibit his attention to the small details that keep the operator on target and away from excursions that lead to trouble. Janet W. McArthur, attending his operations at times as a referring internist, noted that he “never frittered or dithered.” J. Gordon Scannell described him as “probably the most methodical surgeon I’ve ever worked with.” He operated without the permanent professional assistance that he himself provided for Dr. Meigs, and positively relished “ground controlling” young and inexperienced surgeons through complicated operations without ever taking the instruments from them.

His attributes as a surgeon were perfectly summarized in the Ernest Daland Memorial Award given to him in 1985, which reads: “Through consummate skill, with learned patience, by steady giving of himself, he has raised his talent to art, and improved us all.”

Howard Ulfelder once said that his ideal for Vincent Memorial Hospital was very simple: “good patient care.” An important aspect of this caring was being an excellent listener, one who listened not only to patients but even to patients’ mothers. It was by listening to a patient’s mother that he made the discovery with which he is most often associated in media accounts. After he had seen the third or fourth young woman with a clear-cell carcinoma of the vagina, a patient’s mother asked whether he thought that this might have been associated with the medicine she took while pregnant with her daughter. He considered the association, and put two outstanding men to work on it, Arthur L. Herbst, now the DeLee Distinguished Service Professor and chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Chicago and Chicago Lying-In Hospital, and the late David Poskanzer, a neurologist with knowledge and experience in epidemiology and statistics. They worked almost secretly until their landmark paper on the association of maternal diethylstilbestrol therapy with adenocarcinoma of the child’s vagina was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1971.

Personal tragedy forced caring in the home when Howard Ulfelder’s son Bill was stricken with Ewing’s sarcoma, a disease of which he eventually died in 1967.

Throughout his career, Howard Ulfelder had the remarkable bravery of a happy warrior as he went about his work, much of it difficult surgery that involved long standing, stooping and pulling, a heavy burden placed upon a painful arthritic spine. His Parkinsonism, with a tremor that chiefly affected his right arm, began in the 1970’s while he was still an active surgeon, steering his career in the direction of administration. In the years that followed his retirement as Meigs Professor, he devoted himself to the design and building of the Cox Cancer Center at MGH, assuming the administrative role of deputy to the general director for cancer affairs in 1973. The Cox Cancer Center embodies Howard Ulfelder’s ideal of the interdisciplinary approach to the problems of the patient with cancer. As David C. Crockett, vice chairman for many years of MGH’s committee on research and a classmate of Howard Ulfelder’s at Harvard College, has said the Cox Cancer Center is Howard Ulfelder’s monument at MGH.

He worked with the Federation Internationale de Gynecologie et d'Obstetrique (FIGO) over the years to develop its internationally accepted staging system for gynecological cancers. He became chairman of FIGO in 1973. He was a founder, and later president, of the Society of Pelvic Surgeons, a member of the Board of Governors of the American College of Surgeons and of the board's executive committee. He was president of the Obstetrical Society of Boston from 1960 to 1961, and was a member of many other national and international organizations.

It is a mistake to think of Howard Ulfelder as ever having been crippled by his arthritis or his Parkinsonism. Just a few years before his death, he and Ethel went to the Greek Islands with friends, and he managed to climb about wherever they went. Friends, recalling his wonderful sense of humor and wit, found him to be the life of the trip.

At Easter of 1990, he was as well as he had been in a long time, experiencing further improvement of his Parkinsonism as a result of new medication. He and Ethel had just moved to a new retirement community. Brookhaven at Lexington, at the center of a circle of friends. He had already purchased brushes and paints and was preparing for a new career in watercolor painting.

A minor cold, however, resulted in pneumonia. And the respiratory weakness associated with Parkinsonism and spinal arthritis culminated in respiratory failure. He died on April 29, 1990. His was a shining and glowing life. He taught by example, and his example will continue to teach all whom his life has touched.

Respectfully submitted,

George S. Richardson, *chairman*

David S. Chapin

Arlan F. Fuller, Jr.

John W. Grover

Arthur L. Herbst

Janet W. McArthur

Milford D. Schulz

Robert E. Scully

Daniel H. Smith

Herman D. Suit

Chiu-Chen Wang

Avery D. Weisman