Irwin Freedberg, Odysseus for Our Generation

Irwin Freedberg, MD, created an extended tribe of co-workers, co-conspirators, and co-investigators woven into a many-dimensional net. A cadre of those who loved and admired him filled the Sutton Place Synagogue in Manhattan on July 19, 2005, to celebrate a wonderful life, albeit prematurely ended. Now that the architect and designer is gone, his survivors review a life that enriched us all. Numerous papers in this issue of the Journal celebrate Irwin's influence on us personally and on his profession and attempt to explain the personal characteristics that promoted our growth and achievements. We are forced to make this retrospective too soon, and we are dedicated to continuing his legacy.

Irwin was our Odysseus. He was an engaging leader on many adventures, often with memorable antics captured in anecdotes recounted for years. Some of these adventures were fraught with personal and professional risk for Irwin. He displayed the key personality trait of Odysseus, polumêtis: a combination of wisdom, skill, cunning, resourcefulness, and craftiness.

Like Odysseus, Irwin was superb in rhetoric; he was wonderfully persuasive in the halls of Congress and when he helped convince my dean in Rochester to make our division of dermatology a department.

When I was a first-year resident at Harvard, Irwin would lead a Monday morning didactic session after he had been in the Countway Library on Sunday; how could the rest of us not work at 120%? Habits of a lifetime were learned in that and similar settings, and we learned that exceptional achievements in our lives and careers would require extraordinary efforts.

No detail was too small to escape Irwin's attention; in his editorial role for Fitzpatrick's Dermatology in General Medicine, he was involved with each and every chapter. When a chapter that I was editing needed extra work, he stepped to the plate like a skilled relief hitter for his beloved Red Sox. How proud he was of the World Series victory at last.

Irwin had a heart for medicine and a heart for physicians. He attended many American Medical Association sessions and politicked successfully with the very best physicians from all over America for what he thought was best for medicine and dermatology. He loved the young, for he was always young in spirit, and he relished sitting on the lawn at Tilton School during Gordon Conferences, conversing with the next generation and learning their concerns.

Irwin was interested in the biology of keratins for his entire academic career. His New England Journal of Medicine paper “Rashes and ribosomes” was a landmark, describing how the “new biology” would influence dermatology and cutaneous biology. The cover photo
from the article by McLean and co-workers is dedicated to Irwin’s research interests and his memory.

Irwin never stopped thinking; he never went on autopilot, replaying the cassettes of old strategies and the discussions of the past. He thought through the conundrums of our professional world to develop new and effective strategies and solutions. He approached each day with the delight and enthusiasm of a child. He loved keeping up with the latest technology; considering this, he would appreciate that his 50-page curriculum vitae will be available in perpetuity in cyberspace (see Supplementary Data).

Irwin and Irene were a Kennedyesque couple, always positive, always interested in others, raising their family and grandchildren and all their surrogate children from over 50 years in academia. Their travels together were a special way of escaping from academic concerns.

We asked both friends and family to share thoughts, anecdotes, and pictures so we can remember the good times together and the positive influences Irwin had on our lives. The enthusiastic and heartfelt responses we received are a tribute to him. The pain of his untimely death still remains, but his spirit and legacy require us to ask a Freedbergian question: “What can I do today that will make the world a healthier place and enhance the careers of young women and men?”

Lowell A. Goldsmith
Editor

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL
Supplementary Data. Curriculum Vitae: Irwin Mark Freedberg, MD