In his Presidential Address, Profiles of Leadership in Thoracic Surgery [Ann Thorac Surg 1991;51:877-81], Dr. W. Gerald Rainer began by quoting Charles Dickens, “It was the best of times, It was the worst of times…” while reflecting on the circumstances in 1991, including concerns regarding resource-based relative value units, physician reimbursement, and new CPT coding challenges. His remarks concerned observations he had made on the traits and characteristics of important leaders of the Society up to that point.

The first characteristic that Dr. Rainer illustrated was that of loyalty, and he chose to highlight the important contributions of Dr. Robert Ellison and Dr. Herbert Sloan to thoracic surgery in general and to The Society of Thoracic Surgeons more specifically.

He then went on to speak of determination and highlighted Dr. J. Maxwell Chamberlain. Dr. Rainer gave great credit to Dr. Chamberlain’s efforts to help found the Society. He quoted an important sentence from the letter that Dr. Chamberlain sent to thoracic surgeons around the country in September 1963, asking them to consider joining a newly formed organization: “The union, therefore, of those engaged solely in the highest type of thoracic surgical performance dignifies and justifies the creation of a society for thoracic surgeons—a society designed to complement other related societies.”

Dr. Rainer then illustrated the importance of excellence in clinical practice and education by discussing the accomplishments of Dr. Thomas B. Ferguson, who was President of both the major thoracic surgical societies, the recipient of the Sixth Distinguished Service Award, Editor of The Annals of Thoracic Surgery, and had an active clinical practice and teaching schedule. He noted that after a period of intense involvement with organizational affairs, Dr. Ferguson enjoyed a return to the bedside and extensive physician-patient contact, which is both rewarding and “certainly the raison d’être of our specialty.” Dr. Rainer also mentioned the accomplishments of Dr. Hassan Najafi, who served as the 18th President of the Society and as Chair of the American Board of Thoracic Surgery. Dr. Rainer pointed out that in Dr. Najafi’s Presidential Address, he stated that “with the exception of peace, no social ideal deserves more homage than education.”
Compassion for our patients and for all of humanity is the next important trait that Dr. Rainer emphasized, and he stated that “We [STS] have not been as active as we might in the areas of social concern, such as the homeless and the provision of quality medical care for all who are afflicted regardless of their ability to pay.” He recounted that in Dr. F. Henry Ellis, Jr.’s Presidential Address, Frances Peabody was quoted as follows: “One of the essential qualities of the clinician is interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.” Dr. Rainer also pointed out that Dwight McGoon “served as a paragon of virtue” and embodied motivation and hope for humanity.

Dr. Rainer stated that leaders in thoracic surgery have had to deal with issues that go beyond the operating room, bedside, and other clinical activities. He stressed the importance of statesmanship. He recounted the contributions of Dr. Harold Liddle and noted that the Society “has structured its activities and its course in attempts to deal with these outside alien forces and at the same time has preserved our educational and scientific efforts. The Society has attempted to speak for our members…” Dr. Rainer also described the important contributions of Dr. Ralph Alley in the sociopolitical and professional arenas and credited him with leading the efforts of the Society to contract with SmithBucklin for managing the affairs of the organization.

Ethics was the next major characteristic of leadership that Dr. Rainer discussed. He stated that “our concept of ethics is in danger of sustaining severe erosion because of the competitive environment forced upon us by the changes in the socioeconomic modes of practice that we face today.” He later said that “it (ethics) will certainly hold us in good stead in the eyes of the public more than any one attribute, save that of compassion.” Dr. Rainer mentioned Dr. George Magovern, who in his Presidential Address outlined the problems faced by the profession and summed up his thoughts on professional ethics by stating: “Gentlemen, the profession is not for sale.”

Dr. Rainer then reflected on the characteristics required of leaders at the time of his address, such as the ability to face changes in the marketplace, knowledge of electronic technology, the ability to communicate well, adaptability, knowledge of the art of business administration, and some knowledge of political science in order to understand the workings of governmental bureaucracy.

He also went on to speculate about leadership qualities that would be necessary in the future. He stressed his hope that “the lessons of the past will not be forgotten because of problems of the future.” He noted that future leaders must also possess “judgment of values without greed and preservation of dignity of our profession and society”. He also cautioned us to avoid the list of “seven deadly sins” as proposed by Gandhi.

Dr. Rainer closed with an admonition to those in attendance and to us. He stated, “For those of you who have concern about where our future leaders who possess all of the attributes that I have enumerated might come from, I would suggest that you look around you. Where are the giants of yesteryear? Where are the leaders of the future? Look around you; they are here.”