

Christiaan Barnard—The Great Communicator?

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Christiaan (Chris) Barnard (Figure 1) is remembered because he performed the world's first human heart transplant on December 3, 1967, the 50th anniversary of which we celebrate this year. However, he had other talents that are not generally appreciated. These included public speaking and writing for the layperson. (Am J Cardiol 2018;121:1652–1655)

A Way With Words

As a speaker at both professional and public meetings (Figure 2), Chris proved himself to be most articulate and entertaining and could always pitch the lecture at exactly the level that was ideal for the audience, whether learned physicians or school children. He was stimulating, serious, and yet humorous, a speaker who could immediately capture his audience's attention and hold it seemingly effortlessly for the next hour. I never saw him using notes to remind him of what he wanted to say, although to medical audiences he would illustrate his talk with slides (which we all use as a "prompt").

I provide just 2 examples of the stories he would tell to make a serious point or to entertain his audience.

The Joy of Living

The first related to how 2 youngsters—patients in his hospital—had commandeered a breakfast trolley in the hospital ward. It became their grand prix racer, and the corridor became their track.

"The trolley had two sections," explained Chris to his audience. "At the bottom sat the driver, steering the trolley with his legs, and behind ran the mechanic, head down, propelling the cart down the hall. Unfortunately, the driver didn't maneuver the trolley well enough, and they ended up going into the wall, and of course the cups and saucers ended on the floor and broke. That was not very popular with the attending nurse; she put them both to bed and scolded them.

"I walked into their room and looked at the mechanic and the driver. The driver had only one arm; I knew him quite well, as I had operated on him (for a congenital heart disease). Sometime later we saw him again, and he had sarcoma of the humerus, which is a very malignant disease. Surgeons had to remove the entire arm, including the shoulder girdle.

"He was the driver. He was laughing and telling me it was not his fault that they had the crash; it was the fault of the mechanic, who didn't put on the brakes when he told him to. The mechanic was a little boy I did not know, but at that time he was really a picture of horror. He grew up in a very

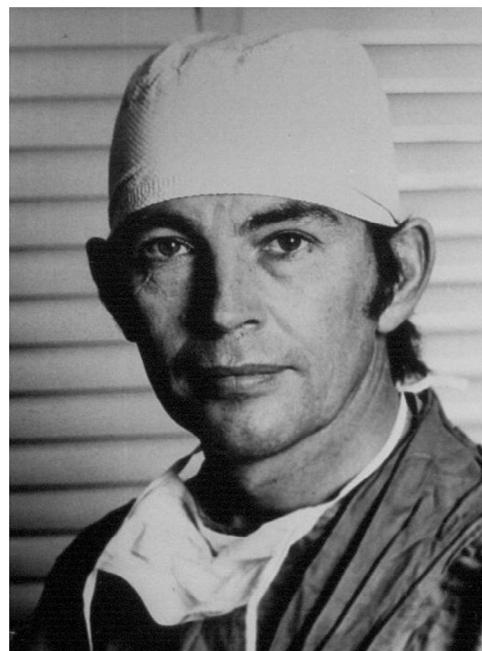


Figure 1. Christiaan Barnard at the height of his fame as a surgeon.



Figure 2. Christiaan Barnard (seated) about to address a typically packed auditorium.

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poor home; his mother and father came home drunk one night and had an argument. The mother threw a paraffin lantern at the father, but it ended on the boy's head and burst.

"The boy developed third-degree burns of the whole head, and both his eyes were burned out—he was blind. At that stage, he had a big tube grafted to his nose to try to reconstruct the nose. He was squinting, like somebody who is blind, but he argued that it had been totally unnecessary to stop the race, because a few cups didn't matter very much—and he did believe they had won the race.

"I realized all of a sudden that life is the joy of living; that is what it is. It is really a celebration of being alive. You see, what they taught me was that it's not what you've *lost* that's important, it's what you *have left* that's important. But I qualify this. There must be a *joy* in living. There must be still enough left so that there can be a celebration. You can't celebrate *nothing*; there must be *something* to celebrate.

"So I think one must realize that, as a doctor, if you value life, your goal must not be to prolong life; your goal must be always to provide something for that patient that he can celebrate—provide something so that life can be the joy of living."

The second story I remember so well was his famous apocryphal "chauffeur story," which I heard him tell many times, but I always laughed at the punch line. It gives a glimpse into his excellent sense of humor.

The "Chauffeur" Story

Apart from his lectures abroad, Chris also accepted speaking engagements in South Africa. For this purpose, the South African government provided him with a limousine and a chauffeur. According to Chris, "The chauffeur was a tall fair-haired young man (not unlike Chris himself) who took great pride in his new and prestigious appointment. He bought himself a smart grey jacket and a peaked cap so that he looked the part (personal chauffeur to the famous Dr. Barnard)."

Together, the professor and his chauffeur visited various cities and towns within South Africa, Chris giving a rather standard, well-organized, and reproducible, 20-slide "canned" lecture. He would explain that "the young driver, clearly intelligent and interested in the topic, always sat at the back of the lecture hall and listened intently." On the way home from these lectures, the chauffeur frequently asked Chris for more details regarding heart transplantation. "After a few weeks, he became quite knowledgeable about the subject—at least for a chauffeur."

On one of these occasions, as the limousine was approaching a small town where Chris was booked to give a lecture, he said to the chauffeur, "Driver, I am very tired this evening. Since you have heard this talk of mine many times, I wonder if you would like to give the talk yourself today." The driver looked somewhat perplexed, but Chris added, "Look, the talk is rather standard, and you have seen all the slides many times. There will be no doctors in the audience tonight. I think it would be quite alright for you to give the talk while I sit and rest at the back of the room." Still the chauffeur hesitated. "The people here do not know me," continued Chris, "and you and I look very similar. I am sure they will not suspect a thing."

Outside the small town, the chauffeur and his passenger exchanged clothing; Chris took off his handmade Italian suit and put on the chauffeur's outfit, with the chauffeur putting on Barnard's suit. Chris took over the wheel of the limousine, and the chauffeur sat elegantly in the backseat.

When they entered the town, there was, as always, a large crowd waiting to greet "Dr. Barnard." The chauffeur, dressed as Chris, emerged from the limousine and was immediately ushered into the lecture hall where he was directed on to the podium. Dressed as the chauffeur in the smart gray jacket and peaked cap, Chris sat at the back of the room. The lecture proceeded uneventfully and Barnard was actually quite impressed with how well the chauffeur had delivered it. Indeed, it made him feel slightly insecure to know that a chauffeur could give the lecture almost as well as he could. The driver had started rather hesitantly, but as his confidence increased, he had become quite articulate and informative. The young man clearly enjoyed being the center of attention, and when he had concluded his remarks, he gracefully acknowledged the applause.

"The chairman then asked, 'Dr. Barnard, would you mind answering a few questions?' I began to feel a little nervous. It was one thing to give a lecture, parrot-like, but quite another to answer unrehearsed questions. But the young driver, now full of confidence, immediately said, 'Of course.' All went well for a while. The questions were simple and the chauffeur, from his many discussions with me in the car, was able to answer them without difficulty.

"But then a distinguished gentleman stood up in the middle of the room and announced that his name was Dr. DeBakey and he was a visitor from Houston in the United States, and he would like to ask a question. I immediately recognized the famous American heart surgeon, and my nervousness turned into panic. What on earth was Michael DeBakey doing in this small town in South Africa?"

Dr. DeBakey was the last person Chris had expected to see there. Now his chauffeur's lack of knowledge would be exposed—and it would appear as if he, Professor Christiaan Barnard, was unable to answer the question correctly. Dr. DeBakey would return to the States believing Barnard to be an ignorant fool.

"Dr. DeBakey then proceeded to ask 'Dr. Barnard' an extremely complex and difficult immunologic question about heart rejection. There was no way the young chauffeur would know the answer—we had never discussed such a complex topic in the limousine. On the podium, the chauffeur, who also recognized the great Dr. DeBakey from the photograph he had seen in my office, was clearly at a loss for an answer. He looked very agitated and began to sweat profusely. At the back of the room, I became increasingly anxious.

"But after a short pause, the chauffeur broke into a confident smile, and said, 'I recognize you, Dr. DeBakey. You are certainly one of the most famous heart surgeons in the world. Your reputation is impeccable and your knowledge extensive. I therefore cannot understand how you can possibly ask me such a simple question. In fact, to show you how simple it is and how easy to answer, I am going to ask my chauffeur at the back of the room to answer it for me.'

Needless to say, the answer from the chauffeur at the back of the room received tumultuous applause from the very impressed audience, and the crisis was over.

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