

# A Special Dedication to Chester A. Burger

1/10/21 – 3/22/11

## Goodbye, Chet. The Remembrance of a Remarkable Man

From your first little note to me in 1975, complimenting something I'd said that was quoted in a PRSA publication, to our last conversation in December of 2010, the power of your friendship, the insight of your thinking, and the profoundly pragmatic advice you so freely offered have guided my career and much of my personal life.

Your sense of yourself was such an interesting part of knowing you. In November of 1990, you opened a presentation to the PRSA Foundation with the phrase, "In the afternoon of my own life..." During that presentation you predicted that if your computer was right you would live until approximately 2010. You did a little better than that.

In a private note to me written last year, after I had asked you a question and for some guidance, your reply began, "Sure, especially in the evening of my life." Perhaps this is the most important lesson among the many I learned from you: The power of candor, which I have come to define as "Truth with an attitude, promptly given."

When Barbara and I came to work for Chester Burger Company in the summer of 1986 in New York, you became an indispensable counselor to both of us, and the stream of complementary notes and letters continued, despite the fact that you retired in 1987. I remember asking you at the time, "What did retirement really mean to Chester Burger?" Your response was so interesting. You said, "I will no longer work for money."

And so you spent the next 24 busy years as a key civilian advisor for the United States Air Force, the Central Intelligence Agency, various New York



Photo by Andre Burger, Chet's grandson and lifelong photography student

City agencies, the Urban League, and countless other agencies, organizations and individuals who found their way to your door.

Whenever I made an important presentation in the New York area or received some recognition, you were in the audience. I've always felt that describing you as a management consultant, primarily in communications, words you chose, was so sterile and colorless. Your life and your work combined to be the very definition of friendship, of selflessness and graciousness.

A compliment seemed always to be on the tip of your tongue, or on the point of your pen. In 1992, I sent you a copy of the speech I was about to present. As always, you combined instructive and constructive advice with the motivation to get something important done.

You said, "Once again, you have written a solid and thoughtful analysis of the problem and what can be done about it. It is very good. As we discussed, I still believe your speeches will be improved by more anecdotes and company names when possible and appropriate (but always in a positive and sympathetic way). Over the years, I have read a lot of peoples' speeches. Yours consistently are among the very best because of the clarity of your content and your analyses of the problem."

### **Chet, you always had a useful suggestion tied to a compliment.**



On another occasion, after having just arrived in New York, I discovered that because you walked to work every day to 171 Madison, you arrived about an hour before the rest of us. So, my wife Barbara and I would get up early, catch a train from Westchester to get to the office early enough to talk with you almost every day. I remember a great many of those conversations and have told stories about them and you for decades.

One of these early morning stories was about my attempts to get on the calendar of a very important New York City executive. I had prepared a letter of introduction which included part of my resume, part of what I wanted to talk to him about, and some lame language about the goals of the conversation, all in just under two pages, single spaced. You examined the draft, then looked thoughtfully at me and said, essentially the following:

"Why don't you tell him that I suggested that you and he could both benefit from having a brief discussion? Then, assure him that within the first 20 minutes he will be able to determine, from his own perspective, whether any further discussion might be useful."

That is exactly what I did. I got the appointment, and a new long-time client and friend.

Another one of my favorite stories is about you and one of your clients. You were invited in to analyze a set of issues and make recommendations for a