



PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Hamilton Naki – a surgical sherpa

Anwar Suleman Mall

In 1994 the Oxford historian Theodore Zeldin wrote *An Intimate History of Humanity*,¹ a historical account with a difference. This major work made no mention of the famous or infamous names in history but was in fact a history of ordinary people, and included cleaners, seamstresses, intellectuals, garage owners and doctors, among many others.

Zeldin's theme was that the personal life of every individual matters and that each life must be seen 'in relation to the panorama of history'.¹ Human beings are not mere examples of their civilisation, nation, or family;² according to him it no longer matters where we come from, what matters is what sort of future we feel we are part of.

I was in secondary school in 1967 when Chris Barnard performed the world's first heart transplant. It captured the international imagination. Those were enchanting times, and every magazine (*Personality, Scope, Time*), book and newspaper article that covered this momentous achievement became a collector's item. Barnard became an overnight hero and his name went down in medical history. He was my hero too!

At that time it would have been sheer childish fantasy to imagine that I would one day join the Department of Surgery at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Looking back I marvel and reflect on how one's idols change as one grows and matures. Not that I don't still hold Barnard in the highest esteem, but I've experienced a shift in my focus with regard to history and historical events that has enabled me to see the truth of the question Zeldin posed about ordinary individuals and their part in history. It has also led to the question, 'Does anyone, no matter how great, achieve anything in life, alone?'

Anwar Mall is a medical scientist and Associate Professor in the Department of Surgery, University of Cape Town. Emeritus Professor Rosemary Hickman is former head of the J S Marais Laboratory.

Corresponding author: Anwar.Mall@uct.ac.za

A day or two after my arrival in the Department of Surgery, of which Professor John Terblanche was Chair, I was sent to the J S Marais Laboratory to speak to staff about my project. I did not realise that Barnard had developed his career in that laboratory, and that it had subsequently become world famous.

As I entered, a kindly looking big African gentleman looked up. 'Yes my boy, what can I do for you?' He was clearly in the middle of an operation, and on the other side of the table stood a white surgeon. In my naivety and lack of political sophistication, I automatically concluded that the black man was the assistant and the white man the surgeon, until the former tapped the latter on the hand and said in a rather authoritative manner, 'Not there, put the clamp here.' That was my first introduction to Hamilton Naki, a most remarkable human being.



Hamilton was born on 26 June 1926 in Centani in the Transkei. He had a standard 6 education, came to Cape Town at the age of 18 as a migrant labourer and was employed as a gardener at UCT. The then Professor of Surgical Research, Robert Goetz, attracted him to the research laboratory, where Hamilton anaesthetised animals and helped with experimental surgery. In the mid-1950s Chris Barnard returned from the USA, where he had learned the latest techniques in heart surgery, to continue his research here. Hamilton

assisted with this research and with the experimental work that preceded and followed the historic first heart transplant. A few photographs of him and Barnard were published, but it was Barnard who won world attention and acclaim.³⁻⁵ Nobody really knew who Hamilton Naki was.

Hamilton continued assisting with heart, liver, kidney and other transplants in the J S Marais Laboratory. Generations of surgeons spent time in the laboratory doing research and obtaining higher research degrees. These surgeons were to become academics in this country and abroad. Hamilton taught surgery to over a dozen individuals who were to become professors of Surgery and heads of department in places as far afield as Tokyo and Nashville. The magnanimous Rosemary Hickman, our friend, mentor and former colleague (who was an enormous support in our careers) wrote that 'despite his limited conventional education, he had an amazing ability to



learn anatomical names and recognize anomalies. He became principal surgical assistant of the laboratory because of his remarkable skill and dexterity.³

One academic said of him, 'Mr Hamilton Naki was to teach them the craft of surgery in the research laboratory. I well remember during liver transplant experiments, two enormous hands would descend into the abdomen, and then with exquisite delicacy and accuracy join the minute blood vessels together, the anastomoses' (unpublished). He was given an honorary Master of Science degree by UCT in 2003 and was presented to the Chancellor of the University as 'Mr Hamilton Naki, an extraordinary teacher and surgical craftsman'.⁶

Hamilton hardly missed a day of work in his career and was always immaculately dressed. When asked by a reporter how he had managed to learn these skills without any formal education he replied, 'I stole with my eyes'.³ Unfortunately after his death some controversy arose regarding his role and duties in the department. However this was subsequently addressed and Naki's rightful role as a valuable member of a research team was put into perspective.^{6,7}

Hamilton Naki played a significant role in my life. Most importantly, he taught me humility. Here was a man whose life was difficult to say the least, but he made every use of the opportunities he had and never failed to share what he learned. He never focused on his personal struggles to survive and had a wonderful sense of humour, sometimes even laughing at the system – perhaps a coping mechanism devised to withstand the pressures of life. He enriched the lives of those he interacted with. All in all he was a warm and compassionate human being who saw the good in others and placed their interests first. He also ran a research laboratory with precision and care, enabling me and many, many others to benefit and build careers.

Hamilton Naki was truly a great South African.

1. Zeldin T. *An Intimate History of Humanity*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.
2. Theodore Zeldin. Google.com. www.butler-bowden.com/intimahist.htm (accessed 7 January 2007).
3. Hickman R. From tennis courts to transplants. *Arch Surg* 1999; 134: 451-452.
4. Theron H. Excellence by degrees as June graduand figures grow. *UCT Monday Paper* 2003; 22(17): 1.
5. Barnard C, Pepper CB. *Christiaan Barnard, One Life*. Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1969.
6. Hickman R, van der Walt J. Heart of gold. *Reader's Digest* 2006; May: 88-94.
7. Wines M. Accounts of South African's career now seen as overstated. *New York Times*, 27 August 2005.

Rosemary Hickman adds:

Earlier this year, satellite television presented a documentary entitled 'Something the Lord made', which was produced in England in 2004. It portrayed the life of Alfred Blalock, who performed the first open-heart surgery and developed the Blalock-Taussig operation. In the 1930s in Nashville, Tennessee, Blalock was approached by a young black man named Vivien Thomas who longed to study medicine but did not have the means. He joined Blalock in the laboratory and soon showed a remarkable surgical skill and ability to learn technical terms. Blalock was appointed to the Chair of Surgery at Johns Hopkins University, and Vivien Thomas and his family went with him. All too soon they became aware of the remarkable discrimination against black people at that time in the USA. The signs around the university were as explicit as those in South Africa at the peak of apartheid. While Blalock lived comfortably in upper-class surroundings, Vivien Thomas and his family lived in a ghetto. Yet he worked conscientiously in the laboratory on the projects relating to management of shock in which Blalock was interested; often he had to devise or modify instruments to suit unusual needs. When Helen Taussig approached Blalock about operating on a 'blue baby', Blalock was able to use much of the expertise that Vivien Thomas had developed in the laboratory – indeed, on one occasion upon feeling an anastomosis that Vivien Thomas

had made almost 'sight unseen', Blalock said, 'Did you do this?... feels like *something the Lord made*.'

There was an outcry among the observers at the first open-heart operation when Blalock insisted that Vivien Thomas be allowed to be at his right shoulder to guide him through certain parts of the procedure. Yet later Blalock received all the accolades, while Vivien Thomas was allowed to be present at the back of the dining hall in the capacity of a waiter.

Gradually these restrictions were reduced and eventually Vivien Thomas became Director of the Surgical Laboratory; much later when Blalock had died he was awarded an Honorary Medical Doctorate by Johns Hopkins University. His portrait hangs alongside that of Blalock in the foyer of the University Medical School.

There are remarkable resemblances between these two stories – and while I have the very highest regard for 'Hami', without whose support I would have achieved little, it must be said that he was not alone in his dedication to work and attempt to do more than his best. Attendance at the long-service awards of the University of Cape Town will attest to the fact that there are (and have been) many such people on the staff who have not been as much recognised. Hami himself would want any fame he received to be shared with them all.