A few years back, I had the privilege of working with an extremely well-trained and skilled group of emergency physicians. One of the senior members of that group was widely acknowledged for his skill as a clinician and diagnostician and was clearly the non-designated emotional leader of our group. When I worked with him, the emergency department seemed to function at its very best. Nurses and clerical staff seemed happier and more efficient, and patients moved through our complicated system more smoothly than usual. I knew that if I were in a clinical jam, this physician would always be there with the answer that was eluding me or the technical skill to back me if needed. In general, when this physician worked, the department was a happy place; the strength of his character and skill seemed to carry us all to higher ground.

One day when I was working, I slipped into our physician office and changing room to get an article from my briefcase for one of the residents. I encountered this doctor just before the onset of his shift. He was sitting with eyes closed and a peaceful smile, seemingly in a meditative state. I tried to be as quiet as I could, retrieved the article, and went back to the department.

Later, when we were working together, he mentioned to me that he was aware of my presence in the office earlier and hoped his appearance had not alarmed me. I assured him that it had not and asked what he was doing. He informed me, “The only time I ever pray (and I’m not sure to whom) is right before the start of a shift in the ED. This is something I have done without fail for 25 years.”

I asked him what he said when he prayed, and he replied, “It always is a little different but generally goes something like this: Dear God, thank you for bringing me here today. Help me remember to be kind, patient, and thorough with each patient I treat, and yet as efficient as I...”
can be. Help me to be a good team member and to respect the nurses, clerks, EMTs, and physicians I encounter today. Help me to pay the utmost attention to what I am doing and still keep a sense of humor. And above all, please help me not to make a decision that harms a patient. Thank you, God, for allowing me to do this work. Thank you for giving me the knowledge, stamina, emotional strength, and love to be here today. Thank you for my wife, son, and daughter, and our life of plenty. Thank you for our health. Thank you for another day of my life on this earth. Amen.”

I have often told residents that learning clinical medicine is somewhat akin to learning to play a musical instrument. One must acquire book knowledge and master technique, but you also learn from other physicians. Like a musician, you pay a fellow practitioner the ultimate compliment by stealing his best licks and making them a part of your own armamentarium of clinical skills. Through the years that I worked with him, I most assuredly stole several licks from this physician, and the practice of arriving at work 5 minutes early and taking a few quiet moments before I start a shift to get my head right and become as humble and attentive as possible is the one I treasure most.