A whispering giant
By William D. Morain, M.D.

All three were from the greatest generation and each had risen to the top of his craft. One was of the big screen. One was of the small screen. One was of the slide projector. They died on the same day, and we mourn them all.

Gregory Peck was named the greatest hero in motion pictures by the American Film Institute for his portrayal of Atticus Finch. David Brinkley received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for journalistic achievement. And Radford Tanzer received the first-ever standing ovation given by the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, for a presentation he made on ear reconstruction. But all were self-effacing gentlemen.

I watched Gregory Peck act. I watched David Brinkley report. But I never watched Rad Tanzer operate. By the time I arrived at Dartmouth, he had retired after 31 years on the DMS faculty. In fact, I had been hired to make up for his absence—in no way to replace him. But I became his friend and soon learned why 4,000 plastic surgeons had heard of New Hampshire.

I had the privilege of conducting a three-hour taped interview with Rad—who was 97 at the time of his death—when he was but a youthful 76. He said that none of it could be published during his lifetime without his permission, a promise I faithfully kept.

Firstborn: The firstborn of an upstate New York dentist, Rad spent his early years working in his father’s laboratory. The Christmas he was five, he became the first kid in town to possess a pair of skis when his father persuaded a friend at the lumberyard to bend a couple of pieces of wood and attach some leather toe straps. With an early interest in his father’s work, he followed a friend home after coming in to the hospital for an operation because I had home after coming in to the hospital for an operation because I had

Rad went on to Harvard Medical School, a surgery residency at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester, and a year of cancer research at his alma mater. In fact, I have sent patients home after coming in to the hospital for an operation because I had not fully resolved in my mind what it was that I should do."

It is this singleness of purpose—this acuity of vision—that qualifies Rad for the same zenith level of achievement as David Brinkley and Gregory Peck. That acuity, the use of wisdom and creativity to solve a vexing reconstructive problem, delivered many children from disfigurement. An entire era of plastic surgery history came to an end with his passing. Rad Tanzer slipped away as quietly as he lived—as though he were whispering into all those lovely ears.