When selecting a subject for this oration, I thought of the usual things we regularly bemoan, including the sorry state of the skyrocketing malpractice insurance premiums, the lack of tort reform, decreasing reimbursement, economic credentialing, residents’ work hours, internal and external threats to the specialty, recertification, the competencies and commandments for maintenance of certification, and so on. Mercifully, the Society sent me all of the previous Matthews orations dating back to the first one in 1938. It was a most interesting read. A review of these previous orations reveals diverse themes. Many dealt with the history of proctology, the early years of the specialty, the transition period with the slow but gradual propagation of teaching and practice of colon and rectal surgery, and the heritage of our specialty. Others voiced concerns on the state of medicine, science, medical administration, and progress in the field of colon and rectal surgery. Yet others raised questions: “Are We Listening?” “Paranoia? Maybe” “Has the Cream Risen?” The most eloquent was entitled “The Dance of Surgery, Who Calls the Tune?”

Many orators sounded a cautionary note regarding the drastic changes in medicine and the need for us to change with the technologic transformation taking place around us. We were warned of the deleterious intrusion of government in the practice of medicine such as DRGs the fear of malpractice lawsuits changing our willingness to accept certain classes of patients, practice defensively, and even retiring early out of fear and frustration. We were encouraged to continue to excel, make inroads in medical schools, conduct quality research, and prove our worth to the greater surgical community. Are these issues not still appropriate for our day and age?

Some of these prior speakers, many who were giants in colorectal surgery in their own time, were real orators, and it seems that they were given unlimited time to deliver the Mathews oration, as it takes almost an hour to read some of them. Fear not! I will be brief; and because I did not solicit the help of my trusted friend and associate Rick Nelson, this talk has no statistical analyses, P values, odd ratios, confidence intervals, or box and whiskers.

All of the previous orators chose a single underlying theme. The orations were given in honor of Joseph McDowell Mathews, the founding father of our specialty. Therefore, I thought I would pose a simple question: Do we still need the Mathews Oration? Are we making too much of it? With few interruptions, we have had an Oration every other year since 1938. Is it likely that this is a tradition that, once started, no one is willing to put an end to?

There are many young members of our Society and a good number of international surgeons attending this meeting, so at the risk of redundancy for those who know their history well, I believe it is important to point out a few highlights of this memorable individual’s career. Joseph McDowell Mathews was the eldest of 10 children born in New Castle, Kentucky in 1847. In 1866 he enrolled in the Medical Department of the University of Louisville; and after spending the one year needed to receive his diploma, he returned to New Castle to practice general medicine and surgery and several years later he moved back to Louisville. In 1877, after several unsuccessful attempts to obtain graduate education in rectal disease in New
York City, he enrolled at St. Mark’s Hospital in London, founded by Mr. Frederick Salmon in 1847, to work under Mr. William Allingham. There is no doubt that Mr. Allingham had a profound influence on the establishment of the specialty of proctology in the United States because when Dr. Mathews returned to Louisville he limited his practice to rectal surgery, being the first physician to adopt this field as a specialty. I cannot believe that anyone attending this meeting today has undergone more severe hardship in achieving his or her goal of becoming a colorectal surgeon.

Dr. Mathews became a lecturer in proctology at the Hospital College of Medicine in Louisville and later Professor of Surgery at the Kentucky School of Medicine, where he started a Department of Proctology in 1883, again a first. He published quarterly medical periodicals devoted to proctology and in 1890 a book entitled *Treatise on Diseases of the Rectum, Anus and Splenic Flexure*—a timely publication to counter the book called *Orificial Surgery and its Application to the Treatment of Chronic Disease* by E. H. Patt, M.D. and published in Chicago 1891. The author of this book espoused orificial physiology, theorizing that irritation of an organ begins at its mouth. Patt advocated “exploring the rectum and removing all pockets, papillae, hardened feces, and other forms of rectal pathology.” This was supposed to heal the physical as well as the spiritual state of man, aiding lame individuals to walk, asthmatics to breath, and dyspeptics to digest, among other effects. It was even reported that whole opera companies had undergone the American orificial operation to improve the quality of their voices.

Such was the state of medicine and medical practice in the United States when the American Medical Association, recognizing the enormous contributions of Dr. Mathews, elected him to its presidency. His presidential address before the 50th annual meeting of the AMA, held in Columbus, Ohio in June 1899, primarily dealt with the public health implications of tuberculosis and syphilis. It was during this meeting that he and 12 other charter members gathered on June 7, 1899 to organize the American Proctologic Society and to elect Dr. Mathews president, a position he held once again in 1913 before his retirement. Article 11 of the original constitution of the Society states that the purposes of the American Proctologic Society are, “the cultivation and dissemination of knowledge and whatever related to the diseases of the rectum and colon.” This demonstrates the foresight of the founding members, in that 75 years before the raging debate on whether the original name of the Society should be preserved or changed to the American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons they had advocated the practice of a complete specialty that encompassed the diagnosis and treatment of diseases of the rectum and colon.

Dr. Mathews was described by his contemporaries as a great orator with a wonderful sense of humor; they said he was charming, affable, winning, and magnetic. He retired from active practice in 1913 at age 65, moved to Seattle with Mrs. Mathews and stayed there for 4 years. They then took up residency in Los Angeles where he died in December 1928, followed by his wife 19 days later.

In 1920 Dr. Mathews addressed a handwritten letter to the American Proctologic Society that was read before its 21st annual meeting in Memphis, Tennessee. I found a copy of the original letter in the Mathews oration given by Dr. Curtis Rosser of Dallas, Texas in 1954. There is a poignant paragraph, which I would like to read for you. It states:

Forty years have elapsed since I embarked in proctology as a specialist. At that time no one *anywhere* had done so. I must confess that it was with some fear and trepidation that I gave up general practice to enter this new and untried field. It was not recognized by any Medical College or organization, not a single article related to its important diseases could be found in any medical journal. The field was covered, and in the hands of the charlatans. Look you my friends, what you by persistent effort have wrought. Today there is not a postgraduate school or Medical College of any standing that does not include proctology in teaching in its curriculum.

Let us look around us today. We have a vibrant specialty and are blessed by excellent colleagues for the most part. We have approximately 40 training programs around the country and train 70 residents each year who go on to receive certification by our primary board, the American Board of Colon and Rectal Surgery. We started with 13 members, had 100 members in 1920, and have 2450 members in our Society today of whom 1400 are Board Certified in colon and rectal surgery, with women approaching 10 percent of that population. We have an enormously successful annual meeting of superb scientific quality, attended by a thousand physicians every year. We have an outstanding journal with ever-increasing impact. We have a wonderful research foundation, which, through the support and benevolence of many pres-
ent in the audience, is able to fund multiple limited projects and grants and to issue requests for proposals for quality colorectal research annually. We teach and practice in numerous medical schools and are role models for medical students and surgical residents. We are represented in all the important surgical societies nationally and internationally. In short, we have fulfilled the wishes and vision Dr. Mathews expressed in his letter of 1920.

So why do we continue to honor Joseph Mathews with another oration? It is most certainly not to fill a void in the scientific program because we receive many more abstracts than we can accommodate. It surely is not to give recognition to another past president. It is because Joseph Mathews defined us. He defined the specialty, taught it passionately, spoke, wrote, and preached proctology, and lived his life as a proctologist. Many years ago I stood before you as your president and gave an address entitled “United We Stand.” Let us give credit where credit is due. Joseph McDowell Mathews united us more than a century ago and defined the reason for our professional existence. Therefore, even though I began with a rhetorical question of whether we need another Mathews’s oration, I conclude by stating that long after our generation of colorectal surgeons is gone I sincerely hope that another, surely a more eloquent, speaker will be addressing a larger, more successful annual convention of our Society with a rousing and aspiring Mathews Oration. We owe this to Dr. Mathews and to all of us as well.

I am the 31st person selected and honored by the Council to deliver the Mathews Oration since its inception in 1938. Considering the scores of giants in colon and rectal surgery who certainly were and currently are more deserving than I to be the Mathews Orator, I am sincerely humbled and grateful for this singular honor.