...and I find that on looking through the records, we know nothing about you’. Thus, wrote the justifiably puzzled Administrator of Artificial Organs in August of 1974. Dr. W. J. Kolff ‘organized’ matters so that I would work with his Division of Artificial Organs for 1 year, commencing in September 1974. He based this invitation upon some desultory correspondence and his own assistance in setting up a dialysis unit in the hospital where this writer worked. On arrival in Salt Lake City, Kolff extended a typically brief welcome, discussed the pH of peritoneal dialysis fluids and went on to describe the attributes and drawbacks of various surfaces used in artificial heart construction. When alone later that night, I had ample time to reflect upon all the favorable and unfavorable attributes of a temporary (1-year) position in what was obviously a most unusual organization. So began an association with Kolff which is now into its ninth year.

In this issue of Nephron, Drs. John P. Merrill, Eli Friedman and Benjamin T. Burton paint word portraits of Dr. W. J. Kolff, each from his own perspective. John Merrill describes Kolff’s first sally to America during the early postwar years and how his most famous innovation affected the lives of an initially small group of researchers and clinicians. The irrepressible Eli Friedman has chosen the unique technique of reviewing an early book of Kolff’s and uses this as an illustration of Kolff the person. Benjamin Burton, who himself achieved the impossible by combining an official governmental position with that of a genuine friend of all who worked with artificial kidneys, provides his own sketch of W. J. Kolff in a delightfully inimitable style. In addition, this writer solicited and gratefully acknowledges scientific contributions from Drs. Carl Kjellstrand, Vittorio Bonomini, Hans Gurland, Jean-Louis Funck-Brentano, Thomas Chang, Hippocrates Yat-zidis, Erikki Haapanen and Anthony Trafford. The choice of solicitation had a specific purpose. What better way is there to emphasize the international character of a person than to publish articles written in Italy, Greece, Finland, Germany, France, England, Canada and the United States. Each of these chief authors has enjoyed an association of one sort or another with Willem J. Kolff spanning many years, to the benefit of all concerned.

Articles in many journals have been written wherein Kolff emerges as a central figure. In addition, there have been innumerable discussions, both public and private, in which the individual’s character has been dissected. Words and phrases such as ‘innovative’, ‘burning desire for knowledge’, ‘impatience’, ‘mentor’, ‘platonic’, ‘Simon Le-gree’, ‘generosity’ and ‘greatness’, have all been applied. All are true to some extent and all, even when taken collectively, are incomplete. If one had to use a single word in preference to all others in order to describe W. J. Kolff, that word would be ‘catalyst’. Kolff’s ability to initiate productive reactions
from as disparate a group of investigators as one could imagine, is nothing short of uncanny. In part, this is due to his ability to recognize the potentials of diverse innovative concepts. Although he is neither an engineer nor a biochemist, he rapidly grasps the principles of most propositions put forward and is able to conceive a variety of future applications for these same concepts.

On reading many of the articles which have featured descriptions of W. J. Kolff, one is struck by the paucity of references to some of his other outstanding characteristics. There is present a very keen sense of humor, which is not the less delightful because of its marked subtlety. Rightly, he values this attribute very dearly and when there occurred several unfortunate episodes within a company he founded (which by the way is a source of funding to the Division), one of his first requests was: ‘Just help me keep my sense of humor.’ Kolff’s enormous powers of persuasion, which combined with hours of preparation and considerable hard work, are a source of significant funding from private donations. There is a persistence which at

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times transforms into stubbornness, the degree of which has to be experienced to be believed. Many is the time that individuals have retreated from entrenched, logical and well-prepared positions in the face of Kolff’s relentless approach, simply because they no longer possessed the stamina to continue with the confrontation. If one wishes to hold a fixed position in the face of Kolff’s disapprobation, one must avoid all discussion on the matter, even he lacks the optical powers of the Ancient Mariner. Another factor noted within the Division of Artificial Organs is Kolff’s ability to generate an air of expectation. In a large part, this derives from his continuing insistence that people ‘do things’. At times, it appears to matter little what these ‘things’ are so long as somebody does them, and Kolff’s impatience with vacillation is a byword. ‘And enterprises of great pith and moment, with this regard, their currents turn awry, and lose the name of action.’

The Prince of Denmark, although doubtless possessing many admirable qualities, would not have lasted 10 minutes within this Division. However, it is quite likely that Ophelia with her insubstantial raft of daisies would have received a warm welcome.

Human behavior is nonlinear, a truism that is surely epitomized by W. J. Kolff. A conservative life-style with a liberal outlook; an environmentalist whose technicians shatter eardrums when drilling new molds; outstandingly generous yet afflicted by intermittent attacks of parsimony; a farsighted and innovative scientist who requested one of his senior colleagues to vacuum form little plastic bags within big plastic bags; a successful initiator of small companies with personal disappointments in the day-to-day running of these companies; so the list could go on and on.

With the passage of time, most individuals tend to modulate their approach to different projects, be more selective in their choice of objectives and in general, adopt a more leisured and possibly more rational approach to their main interests. This may be described as reducing the number of goals to fit within a progressively shrinking time frame. Kolff has elected to tackle as many, or even more, projects than in the past, warping them to fit within the shrinking time frame, which means that virtually every project undertaken must be completed ahead of a standard schedule. The end result is organized turbulence, with individuals audibly wondering whether they are involved with a scientific research institute, a business college or clinical care. However, it is not dull. Kolff’s approach to research in general distills into a most attractive simplicity: ‘Anything not forbidden is compulsory’. His handling of regulatory burdens is equally incisive: ‘It is easier to ask forgiveness than permission’.
This writer has learned and continues to be educated on an almost daily basis whilst working with and in conjunction with the Division of Artificial Organs headed by Dr. W. J. Kolff. It is a compliment to the man to state that this continuing educational process makes life very enjoyable indeed.