Dedication to John C. Nemiah, MD

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Introduction to the Afternoon Program for Dr. Nemiah

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Each person will at various points during this wonderful day mull over reminiscences of John Nemiah. For a moment, as a way of beginning our program, I will turn to one of my own. I recall the day that John caught me in the hall with one of his typical questions: 'George, what preposition follows "Festschrift"?'. The expression that immediately came over my face appeared to represent phi-logic intensity. Actually, I can now confess to John what was going on underneath: 'You're asking me!'. 'Festschrift' appeared on that heavy book from a remainder sale. That particular feast of writing honored Heinz Hartmann and even the translation still sounded like German. Before I did my first lap of obsessive doubting, the Nemiah magic took hold. It was typical of John to assume you would know the answer to his question. His assumption contagiously transmitted respect that made you feel you wanted to know and you found out. As a side benefit, he usually helped to heal that most arrested of ego functions, the capacity to write English sentence. However, on that particular day, had I fully exploited John's magic, I might have also been able to find out from him just what goes into the introduction to a Festschrift, especially for someone who is both a poet laureate and intellectual historian of psychiatry.

After all, it is John who quoted and lived by these lines from Butterfield:

'If we turn our present into an absolute to which all other generations are merely relative, we are ... losing the truer vision of ourselves which history is able to give us .... (we are) also passengers in the movement of things.'

I felt that John certainly deserved proof that I had learned from his values. But, where to find a tribute to a teacher that was both historical and appropriate? No easy task. One example: Vendler wrote a moving account of her studies with I.A. Richards. The renowned Professor of Poetry liked to make the classroom dark so that the students would keep their eyes fixed to a screen upon which he would project the slide of a poem. He had the idea that maybe that kept the mind from wandering. But John had the opposite problem. The medical students and residents were glued to the monitor when John showed his videotape interviews and regularly resisted mental wanderlust. One example after another proved fascinating but not relevant.

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And then, I found it. My source. It was a veritable 'cliff notes' for doing an introduction to this program. This document was authored by a psychiatrist, no less, who paid homage to his former mentor and chief. This pupil wrote of his teacher:

‘Although very much a man of the 20th century, fully alive to the social and scientific issues of the modern age, (he) always struck me as one of the last of the great Edwardians...

He appeared to be imbued with a sense of confidence in the orderliness, rightness, seriousness, and permanency of the world – (the) inner certitude gave him an air of inner strength that commanded respect and deference.’ The pupil then notes that beneath this craggy public face there was ‘a warmth and concern that aroused deep affection for the “chief – an emotion heightened by occasional glimpses of his profound sense of the comic and his earthy humor and speech’.

My jaw dropped. Was it possible? If Dos-toevsky had not scooped me, I think I was on the trail of a ‘double’.

As I proceeded, the sense of coincidence heightened almost unbearably. For example, consider this passage:

‘He was passionate in his respect for individuals and their ideas, no matter how different from his own views and interests. The psychiatric service he created ... and then directed for two decades was based on the premise that there are many paths up to the mountain of truth.’

In this era of polarity and polemic, John imposed only two of his ideas on his pupils, staff, and journal authors – namely that they pursue the filling out of their ideas by thinking and reading and that they ultimately write them down clearly. Beyond the borders of these constraints there was total freedom. Genes, Jones, Freud, Free Radicals, no matter.

On the more personal side, the pupil of this miraculous archive wrote that his teacher’s ‘intellectual openness and integrity were matched by the fairness and honesty with which he dealt with his colleagues’. He was referring to when his teacher helped him write his first paper. The professor would accept no more credit than a brief acknowledgment. This, too, uncannily captures the essential John Nemiah. How many times has he read the drafts of a resident or junior colleague who sat by his side in a state best called ‘moist pallor’. His empathy for the tender moments or virginal scholarship was near perfect. He identified with what was trying to get said to help it get free of its sticky prose covering. He did it with the lightest and most effective of touches. He never intruded, controlled or overran. Not once has he exacted credit for himself or declared any area his by eminent domain.

At this point, I was ready to believe in reincarnation. Listen to this. The pupil then writes: ‘The scientific articles and text books he regularly wrote, in impeccable prose, were – like everything else he did – models of excellence for his younger staff members. He led us by examples not by administrative fear and regulation and everyone found something in him to admire and love.’

Does this not fit John? Can we recall for a moment this passage from the ‘Foundations of Psychopathology’:

While we have machines for exploring the physical universe that Augustine never dreamed of, our techniques for penetrating the human mind have changed little, if at all. Patience, time, the ability to look without prejudice, thoroughly and inquiringly at inner experiences, the willingness to take mental events seriously – these are still the tools of our explorations. Nor does our search necessarily bring us to truths unknown

till we have come upon them. Every man and every age, working against in-dwelling resistances, must rediscover for itself the same basic psychological facts. It is not so much the insight as the language which describes it that changes.

I guess I can no longer veil my mysterious source and its author. Many of you are already onto its identity. It was written by John Nemiah himself in appreciation of his own chief and mentor, Stanley Cobb. Some years ago, 'Notes and Comments' section of the 'New Yorker' was once poignantly devoted to the departure of an anonymous colleague -the metaphor is hard to capture, but roughly suggested that parts of this colleague had dispersed like the seeds of a milkweed puff into all who had known him. John's own rendering of this image reads as follows in his appreciation of Cobb:

'As I now realize in recalling these memories of one of Harvard Medical School's greatest professors, he showed me by example what it meant to be a physician leader. I can only hope that some of his tutelage has been passed onto his academic grandchildren.'

As John brought the essence of Stanley Cobb to us, may we, his academic children, pass John Nemiah within all of us onto the next generation of students. If we succeed, we do honor to both John and all of psychiatry.