On the Road to Divine Inspiration with Dom: A Thirty Year Retrospective and Tribute

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I first met Dom when he interviewed me for medical school at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine (AECOM) in 1975. To call the encounter an interview would not adequately describe the nature of the extended interchange. He was part-Buddha, part-Freud, part-da Vinci, part-Groucho and much, much more. He is a force of nature, one who subtly but relentlessly pulls you into his gravitational field. He is a person of boundless complexity. He is the most private of public figures. He has true wisdom and a generosity that astounds me to this day. He always fights the good fight. He is joyous and his enthusiasm and breadth of perspectives are truly infectious. He is an impeccable anarchist, all in the name of creative scholarship. He is a self-taught Talmudic scholar in the global sense of the word. He has a vibrancy that rattles your bones. He must know Sanskrit and the power of words and sounds to evoke universal vibrations. He believed in me from the start and waited patiently for me to find my own way.

During the interview, he understood who I was and what I needed instantly and instinctively. I would not have had the intuition, the confidence, the graciousness, the time, or the generosity of spirit to see it through without him. Only two other people in my professional life openly encouraged me to continuously push the boundaries of the known and understood me like Dom. These individuals creatively mentored with wit, passion and selflessness: both, not surprisingly, were also Einstein scholars, Ora Rosen and Tony Adamany, shooting stars whose tenures were all too brief.

Applying to medical school was an afterthought for me. I was interested in everything and medicine appeared to be the most appropriate compromise, the place where the last vestiges of renaissance sensibility were still alive and vibrant. The reality was very different. But Dom reassured me that the physician-scientist model represented a noble calling, that neurology seamlessly melded past and present and future, and that basic neuroscience research was the most direct link to understanding the elegance of the natural world. There, I could progressively forge an integrated theory of mind-brain-disease relationships.

I had been a Columbia undergraduate and had studied medical school neuroscience in the midst of the “clash of civilizations” transition between the reigns of Malcolm Carpenter and Eric Kandel. By contrast, Dom’s Einstein neuroscience course was truly visionary as well as approachable, seamlessly logical, mystical and inspiring, all in the space of a few concentrated months. At its zenith, Dom taught two-thirds of all lectures and created a unified vision of all aspects of this continuously evolving field which, like a celestial “black hole” in the universe, devours, deconstructs and then imaginatively reconstructs all new knowledge to create an empiricism of mind that encompasses all fields. He was on a timeless, sacred and often lonely mission to truly impart the most essential fragments of our accumulated knowledge with his own interpretive wisdom and boundlessly creative scholarship. All this he carefully disguised (so as not too frighten away the budding but still fragile young student) using humor, satire, impeccable witticisms and good cheer. During the winter of our informational extravaganza, he allowed snow ball fights in the lecture hall while at the same time not missing an intellectual beat—the Cheshire cat grin never left his face!

I spoke more with Dom than with my fellow medical students, many of whom had more narrowly defined interests. Dom became my expressive outlet and my intellectual mentor. It all progressed in a dual atmosphere of extraordinary informality and utter seriousness that was truly unique. We had a ritual: I would show up unannounced with my latest theory to be progressively fleshed out as part of our on-going “collaboration.” I would be greeted by Dom’s impeccably coiffed gatekeeper, Norma Fox, who always acted as if she was seeing me for the first time. She would invariably inquire about my intentions and suggested that Dr. Purpura might be able to see me three weeks from next Tuesday. Dom would hear the commotion, give us both a wink and usher me into his Kennedy Center office. The conversations lasted until they were finished; time never seemed to enter into the equation. Throughout medical school, my conversations with Dom continued unabated. Translational medicine, a term not yet coined, began to intrude into our conversations as I entered the wards. I began to explore the Kennedy Center; it was the most exciting place I had ever experienced. Everyone in the Center was world-class and each faculty member was on their own sacred academic mission. As director, Dom added the intellectual vibrancy and humanism that created an atmosphere of unrelenting creativity and multidisciplinary scholarship.

When it came time to apply for post-graduate training, it
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was clear that I would do a neurology residency and went about trying to select the best preliminary year internal medicine internship in the country. Two of Dom’s recently minted-graduates, Ray Maciewicz and Steve Helfand, had opted to do their neurology training at Mass General Hospital (MGH), but I was very unsure about what best to do. With Dom’s help, I chose Boston and the Einstein-like atmosphere of Beth Israel Hospital. Boston was the most wonderful year of my life both academically as well as socially. I loved internal medicine, excelled clinically as well as academically (in large part due to the excellence of my AECOM medical school training!) and was asked to complete my internal medicine training either at Beth Israel or at MGH. However, the psycho-emotive tractor-beam of Einstein drew me ever homeward. Upon starting my neurology residency, I feared I had made a huge mistake returning to Einstein, and Dom offered to help me find a position elsewhere. After much deliberation, we both agreed that I should stay.

Shortly after, Dom left to become Dean at Stanford, my life proceeded on a different track. During my final year in residency rumors of Dom’s return to Einstein to become Dean began to surface, but New York University (NYU) was also rumored to be speaking with him. On instinct, I called him one day during the early stages of the process to inquire about his intentions. I think he was stunned by my interest. Soon after, Dom returned to Einstein as Dean.

I finished my residency and immediately started as an Einstein faculty as Assistant Professor of Neurology with a five-year National Institutes of Health (NIH) teacher-investigator award from National Institute of Neurological Disease and Disorders (NINDS) and with Dom as the new Dean. Our relationship had reached its next phase. I was reticent to try to reestablish our old routines of very frequent communication. As usual, the first time I really needed to speak with him it became clear that important schedules could be rearranged to accommodate my need to see him. I was stunned at how he was able to find time for me. He helped me when I decided to split my academic time between Einstein and NYU to explore various interrelated areas in the complex and complementary fields of molecular genetics and cognitive neurology. Though I was able to start fruitful collaborations and obtain much recognition in a very short time, I became more and more dissatisfied with my seemingly competing careers at two biomedical institutions.

I knew the situation could not continue in this way. I contemplated resigning from my faculty position and embarking on an advanced post-doctoral fellowship. I consulted with Dom intermittently during this process but he always refrained from giving unsolicited advice. I needed to discover my own way, and Dom greatly facilitated this by being the sagely observer, a Zen master in the Northeast Bronx! He never volunteered an opinion but as the occasion warranted made carefully crafted and devastatingly accurate observations intended to enlighten rather than to criticize. Dom cut to the chase like the delicate (neuro)surgical artisan that he was.

At that crucial point in my career, I opted to return to Einstein full-time and to concentrate on building my basic science career in the still very nascent field of stem cell biology. Motivated by my desire to develop an integrated theory of mind from the molecular to the systems level, I instinctively knew that I had to temporarily abandon my immediate goals to allow me to develop the advanced biomedical tools, aptitudes and scientific discipline to ultimately address these complex questions in a scientifically rigorous and meaningful way. Throughout this extended period, Dom always concentrated on how best to serve as an accurate mirror to reflect how my own personal growth as a biomedical scientist and a scholar was proceeding. All the rest was clearly irrelevant to him. There were times when he was clearly frustrated with my lack of more tangible evidence of scientific progress or milestones achieved and my perceived lack of political and interpersonal skills. However, these implicit thoughts never intruded into our conversations, and he continued to provide his usual series of unique insights, perspectives and encouragement. There was a sense of timelessness and an atmosphere of unbridled optimism that always pervaded our encounters. These twin perspectives gave me the fortitude to persevere against considerable odds and the objective distance to more accurately gauge the personal and scientific impact of my continuing professional actions and interactions.

It was the best of times and the worst of times. I gradually emerged from my extended academic cocoon and essentially overnight became Director of the Neurology Services at Jacobi Medical Center and North Central Bronx Hospital and in charge of my own stem cell research laboratory at the Kennedy Center. In a previous academic incarnation, I had been reluctant to assume such administrative responsibilities. Now I was discovering hidden talents and aptitudes that frankly surprised me and, in fact, saddened me to think that I had wasted precious and valuable time to find the essence of myself. For Dom, I think the revelation came when I was asked to make a formal presentation as the new director of the core tissue culture facility for the site visit team from NIH for the Kennedy Center core grant renewal. Dom had always known I was capable of delivering. In retrospect, I realized that I finally began to develop and grow the clinical and research enterprise with the same casual intensity that is the sine qua non of Dom’s personal and professional style and substance.

When Herb Schaumburg stepped down as chair of neurology in 2003, I decided, after much thought, to become a candidate for his successor. My rationale came down to issues of personal growth as well as a
national and international academic vision that I had always nurtured as an intellectual totem that reflected my family’s heritage. The selection process seemed interminable. I used the opportunity to immerse myself in our research studies. As usual, I kept Dom abreast of our evolving research directions. He seemed fascinated but reserved. I sensed that he did not think the neurology chair was compatible with my research aspirations or my personality. He did not intrude, state an opinion or give himself away. After the search committee rendered their decision, I felt anxious for the first time when I had a scheduled appointment with Dom. He greeted me warmly and genuinely seemed relieved and happy for me upon my appointment to chair of the Saul R. Korey Department of Neurology. For the first few months of my tenure as chair he watched me with a keen and quizzical eye. Then things became much more relaxed. We began to weave a new relationship incorporating those magical elements of the early days with a renewed sense of scientific urgency, mutual respect, and deep affection.

I have just returned from a four day celebration of Dom’s life and legacy in Palm Beach. I was honored to be chosen to present our research findings and new experimental approaches and directions to the Einstein Board of Overseers. In the preamble to my talk, I reflected on what Dom has meant to me, to my academic mission, to Einstein and to the international biomedical community. It is a debt that I, AECOM and the larger biomedical community can never hope to repay. I have always spoken of my special relationship with Dom with an unusual degree of joyfulness and reverence. I have also made it clear to Dom, that as long as we are both still alive, healthy and relatively sane that I would coerce him into continuing to spread his humor, grace, selflessness and his singular message of enlightenment to an ever expanding stage. In return, I silently pledged to finally fulfill his initial vision of my potential as a creative scientist and as a compassionate physician and human being.