

Letter to the Editor

Dr. Simon Auster

I am responding to the *Reflections* article on Dr. Simon Auster, *The Pharos*, Autumn, 2020.

I had the honor of serving as Chair of the Department of Family Medicine from 1989 to 1995 at the Uniformed Services University (USUHS) while Simon was on the faculty and Director of the Human Context in Health Care Course (he was always “Simon,” not Dr. Auster).

It was a pleasure and honor to serve as one of a dozen small group facilitators each week for Simon, and review the reflection papers from students, sometimes sharing them with him, leading to the infamous “see me.” He would not only help the students to address their own perceptions of difficult issues in the doctor-patient relationship (family violence, sexism, racism, homosexuality, medical errors, alcohol and drug abuse), he also reached out to students to help identify personal issues that they had experienced or were experiencing (physical abuse, alcohol abuse, depression). He had a huge impact on so many students. I remember one student that Simon was concerned about who was abusing alcohol. He questioned her and she claimed that it was not a problem, that she was doing fine and was getting “C’s.” His response, “Well that might be fine for you, but you are surely not a “C” student.” She got the message!

The magic of Simon’s course was that he would take his topics each week, distribute readings, and have a panel addressing the topic—typically faculty or students who had a critical story to tell. The USUHS Dean, Jay Sanford (AQA, University of Michigan Medical School, 1951), was usually one of the first panelists to appear describing the critical issues in caring for future patients and his personal stories, so the message was sent that this was a crucial course.

The students would then meet in small groups with faculty facilitators and write a reaction paper on the topic and their response to the readings, panelists, and small group discussion. It made them address their own early perceptions of these topics and how that might influence caring for patients in the future.

One of my favorite Simon stories involved a student who came to see him after one session in his small group and said, “Dr. Auster, Dr. ‘Faculty Facilitator’ is trying to make me think!” With his ever-present smile and twinkle in his eye, his response simply was, “We wouldn’t want that to happen, now would we?” He was a treasure.

I would like to express my complements to Drs. Weiner, Meyer, and Schoemaker for their touching and

very human portrayal of this amazing man. For a number of years after I retired, we would connect around Christmas by phone each year and I know Simon had friends all over the globe he would reach out to. Reading the Reflection showed me I only knew a small part of the journey of this Renaissance man who made such a difference in his caring and gentle way to an entire generation of USUHS students and their families. Thank you!!

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