

Foreward

The riveting memoirs Murray Simon has written takes us on a remarkable arc through history and personal accomplishment with a richness of recollection and attentiveness to detail that makes it fascinating and informative to read. This is not surprising, since to all who have had the great fortune to know him, Murray Simon is an extraordinary man.

From his impoverished childhood growing up during the Depression years in East Harlem -- where he began as such a lackadaisical student that he was dismissed from his Yeshiva -- he went on to craft a magisterial career as an educator whose work and dedication not only touched the lives of untold students he dealt with face to face on a daily basis, but also provided the architecture for entire national education systems around the globe. In between, and against all odds, he survived a protracted childhood case of bronchiectasis at age 12 during which he was hospitalized for 7 weeks in 1938 and later served with distinction (and survived) as an infantryman and machine gunner in the Third Division of the U.S. Army during the brutal winter campaign of 1944-45. He was awarded the Purple Heart then and many decades later, in 2011, was made a Chevalier in the French Legion of Honor by French President Nicolas Sarkozy for his service to France during the war.

Surviving members of his unit were also belatedly recognized and honored by European governments as well as by the United States as Liberators of the concentration camps during the closing weeks of World War II in Europe. My classmates and I knew none of this in September 1956 when we first encountered Murray Simon as our social studies teacher for class 7-4B at Nathaniel Hawthorne Junior High School in Yonkers, New York, where Murray had relocated to begin anew after a bumpy two years as a teacher in North Carolina. We were twelve year olds, most of whom had never had a male teacher during our elementary schooling, and we were a little puzzled at first blush over this bow tie wearing man who announced that we would be expected to memorize and recite the Ephebic Oath -- an ancient Greek oath pledging eternal civic responsibility -- at the start of class each day. Had we been told that our Mr. Simon had been a soldier in WWII, it wouldn't have meant much to us anyway: from the time horizon of a 12 year old, that war was so long ago it seemed like it had been closer to the Civil War than current times.

After all, the heroic general who led U.S. Forces in the invasion of France and the conquest of Germany, Dwight Eisenhower, looked like a friendly old slightly doddering grandfather in our eyes during his television appearances. To us, Murray Simon was of indeterminate age but was clearly vastly older than we were.

Something remarkable and transformative happened in that classroom as the days of autumn wound by. Murray Simon became our guide, mentor, arbitrator, counselor, teacher, and our inspiration. At a run-down junior high school with overcrowded classrooms and most teachers more focused on maintaining classroom decorum than on imparting information or any creative education, Mr. Simon was our shining beacon and his classroom, our safe (and stimulating) harbor.

The special chemistry of that 1956-57 academic year for class 7-4B was felt not only by the students but by the teacher, who despite his earlier self-doubts, came to feel the affirmation of his career in education from the magic that energized the air during our daily sessions. Murray's effect on his students was so powerful and lasting that many members of that class remained in touch with him over the next six decades, finding his thoughtfulness and robust zest for life a tonic that kept the classroom aura of wonderment and discovery and challenge alive in our hearts.

Murray Simon went on to earn his doctorate in education from NYU and after a stint as a Dean and adminis-

trator at Rockland Community College, spent a quarter century in the field of international education, which took him to postings from Colombia and Bolivia to Botswana and Liberia, with a few detours to various Asian countries as well. Throughout these years, Murray spear-headed efforts to modernize, improve and, in many instances, innovate entire countries' educational systems. In characteristic fashion, he was able to bring about progress by forging numerous friendships with key people, including government leaders, who found his affable demeanor engaging and also noticed over and over again that one of Murray's secrets to success was not demanding recognition for his ideas and solutions, the credit for which he was more than happy to extend to others as long as his goals were attained.

Murray had no intention whatsoever of simply sitting back, resting on his laurels, and enjoying his retirement after 1995. He went on to new careers as a rabbinical pastor founding his own congregation in Maryland and as an advocate for the Hispanic community in Howard County, co-founding CONEXIONES, an organization aimed at promoting academic success for Hispanic students. In 2006 Murray was honored as Educator of the Year by the Maryland Governor; in 2009 he was given the Pat Hatch Award for his extraordinary volunteer work and leadership in ethnic diversity.

When Murray Simon first began to write his memoirs and send me chapter drafts, I was astonished at the vigor of his memory. He recalled the smallest details of basic training in the Army, the names of fellow patients and staff from his 1938 hospitalization at Mount Sinai in New York City, the lyrics of advertising jingles from the Great Depression, and was able, close to a half century after his teaching debut in Yonkers, New York, to name all of the students in class 7-4B.

I couldn't remember even half of my classmate's names, nor could I remember the tag lines for Ovaltine commercials or Burma Shave billboards, but Murray could pause for a moment and, in walking encyclopedia fashion, rattle them off. That he could do this in Yiddish, Spanish, and a bit of German, as well as in his Churchillian English, was all the more remarkable.

A remarkable memory is certainly appropriate to a very remarkable life. That Murray transformed himself, with inspiration from his fellow GIs as well as from his high school and university teachers into a man who has touched so many other lives with compassion, grace, wisdom and generosity is inspirational and educational for us all. That throughout his journey he has always honored his Judaic roots and traditions, no matter where he was living in the world, and has always looked first to help others only adds to our admiration for this special doer of a man.

Class 7-4B is not alone in loving and wishing to honor this humble, most multi-faceted man who has been our Socrates, Voltaire, Thoreau and Picasso, who first was an incandescent teacher in a bow tie and became a life-long friend.

Robert C. Kolodny, M.D.

April 2012 , Murray's 7th grade student 1956-1857