

Obituary

Teacher, Scholar, Mentor, Friend: Prof. Dr. Faisal Masud

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These are 'SAD' People; my eyes widened and I started listening carefully to that great wizard of a teacher, Faisal sahib. He was teaching us "Aortic Stenosis" a condition where the heart is unable to pump blood to the body adequately, in our final year of medical college. He went on to explain what the acronym SAD meant: Syncope- Angina – Dyspnea, the main clinical features. He acted out each one of them in front of us, explaining the pathophysiology behind them and how to diagnose and manage the condition.

Never before had I experienced such a performance. Years later when I got to know him closely I found out that he had acted on stage in the UK during his foundation years as a physician. He revealed this interesting piece of information about himself when we were discussing a Shakespearean drama. He told me how he learned to use his voice and other nonverbal ways to express what he meant during a conversation or a class.

I was lucky enough to have my final year Medicine rotation with him and then subsequently worked with him for six months during my house job. It opened up a whole new vista of opportunities to learn from this master teacher. The history taking skills he taught us were totally different from the conventional way we had been taught by others. His was a more practical, problem-oriented approach which nearly always helped us to reach the correct diagnosis. That was the real joy of medicine which he always relished; to reach a diagnosis. He used to tell us, "It does not matter to me whether you can tell me more than a hundred causes of liver enlargement. What I want to know is, what is the cause of the enlarged liver in this patient?"

Those six months were a great learning experience not just in becoming good diagnosticians but also learning to be empathic, conscientious and intellectually curious. He told us that we cannot play God by which he meant that while treating a patient we cannot financially cripple the whole family. We

were taught to avoid fancy expensive medicines and lab tests. If we prescribed more than three medicines to any patient, we had to justify their use. We learnt how to practice humane medicine from him. Once we asked his permission to go to a lunch being catered by a Pharmaceutical company; he abhorred the idea. He gave us money from his own pocket to go and have something to eat and advised us to never fall prey to these tactics. Rather than buying our lunches, he said, ask these companies to provide medicines or other equipment for our patients.

His ward rounds were unmatched. He was able to make such fascinating pictures out of the jigsaw puzzle of history and physical exam that we were left dumbfounded; and yet when he explained it, it all sounded so simple. I vividly remember a patient whose fasting glucose levels were quite high and he told me to decrease his night Insulin dose. Then he explained how more insulin at night is causing low glucose levels in the middle of the night. The body compensates by increasing glucose production leading to high morning glucose. So the way to treat morning Hyperglycemia was to decrease the dose of Insulin at night.

Post-round tea or coffee with him was an open discussion which consisted not only of medical subjects but also philosophy, art and literature. He would talk about various schools of philosophy and relate them to mathematics and physics. Mathematics was his great love and he passed that love to his children as well. He told us how he wanted to be a physicist but had decided to become a doctor for reasons of his own. He had one of the sharpest intellects I have ever known; a stark contrast to the intellectual pygmies he was surrounded by.

He tried to convince me to choose medicine as a specialty and offered to get me a training job in medicine in UK but the despondency of chronically ill medical patients was too much for me. Faisal sahib believed that medicine was the way of the future; with advancements in genetics and other disciplines, he

thought surgery would become obsolete. I countered that our ward was full of patients with chronic diseases of Liver, Kidney, Heart and lungs. All these could be treated by transplants. After every emergency call our wards were filled with these people and it made me feel helpless and depressed. Faisal sahib finally relented and then said: OK, become a surgeon but then make such a name for yourself like no one else has before. He used to say: in a room full of light bulbs, to become another light bulb means nothing. Either become a Sun in a room full of light bulbs or become a light bulb in a dark room. With this in the back of my mind I decided to become a surgeon.

Our connection continued through my family most of whom were his patients. Whenever I accompanied my mother we had a detailed chat in which he would inquire about my career progress and research projects and would always offer valuable advice. He often pushed me to author a book. He was of the opinion that doing proper, meaningful research was as hard as climbing a mountain. On the other hand writing a book was more convenient and satisfying.

Fast forward to 2014, I was working as Professor of Surgery & Director Medical Education at PGMI, Lahore. I was abroad on a course for advanced laparoscopic surgery when I received a call informing me that Faisal sahib wanted to see me urgently. I was thrilled. I went to see him as soon as I landed back in Lahore. I was over whelmed by his affection as he embraced me, and was surprised by his offer to come and join KEMU as a Professor of Surgery. He told everyone present that I was his student and like a son to him. He asked me to join and look after the department of Medical Education in addition to my duties as Professor of Surgery. In student life we used to look up with awe at our Professors and now I would be a Professor at my own Alma Mater; it was a dream come true.

Serving as Professor of Surgery at KEMU with him as Vice-Chancellor gave me a great opportunity to work closely with Faisal Sahib. He was a visionary, far ahead of his times. He could foresee things just as clearly as he diagnosed the most challenging medical conditions. He knew the importance of information technology in an academic institution and created a state of the art facility for KE. Today when we are using this department for online learning for all university programs we understand what he had seen many years ago.

His lectures were always packed; he continued doing those even after becoming Vice Chancellor. He was a gifted teacher and was able to connect with students in a manner which remains unmatched. He had

an uncanny ability to make the most difficult of subjects simple and palatable, but more importantly memorable. I vividly remember when he taught us how to localize a neurological lesion using the imagery of electrical wires and bulbs. Which sign will help us in identifying which wire is cut at a certain level? He would mimic different kinds of gait which a patient could have in different conditions. These things are imprinted on my mind even after nearly thirty years.

His teaching sessions were performances involving everyone and making learning thoroughly enjoyable. He loved teaching. It was his life and he touched numerous lives through it. Watching him also inculcated a love of teaching in me. Interacting with young, brilliant, curious minds is what I enjoy. I understand now why he never left teaching even when he had so many other competing engagements. The age old idiom, "To teach is to learn twice" is very true. Sometimes while teaching you understand finer points which you had not picked up while reading it on your own.

Everyone knows about his teaching and diagnostic prowess but what surprised many of his detractors was his brilliance in combating dengue and his administrative competence. During the Dengue epidemic in Lahore when lives were being lost, a team of Sri-Lankan doctors who had come to help fight this menace told the Chief executive of the province: when you have Prof Faisal Masud here, you don't need our help. He proved this again when he identified that the cause of unexplained deaths in Punjab Institute of Cardiology was a drug which had been accidentally contaminated by an anti-malarial drug and was being dispensed unknowingly. That drug was immediately recalled and Faisal sahib and his team helped save thousands of lives.

He established SIMS and put it on the medical education map of Pakistan. It had been started as a half-hearted attempt at a much needed new medical school in a rapidly growing city and province. When he took it over the college had no building of its own or a proper faculty. He built a state of the art facility to benefit generations to come.

But it was at KEMU where he out shone everything he had done before. He formulated much needed rules and regulations which had never been worked on since the college became a university in 2006. He established a culture of research, constituted ethical and institutional review boards of reputable academicians and personally chaired the advanced studies and research board regularly reviewing all research projects. He himself was a keen researcher and always had new ideas and proposals and

collaborated internationally.

He was very interested in the historical architecture of KE. He renovated the famous anatomical rooms and its dissection hall as well as the Kapurthala block housing the Physiology, Pathology and Biochemistry departments. The number of students over the last two to three decades had increased from around 200 per year to more than 325 and most of the lecture halls in the University could not accommodate this number. He increased the capacity of existing halls to house the students comfortably. But it was the renovated Patiala block which was his crowning glory. His love of details was most evident here. He spent hours on identifying the right kind of “white Ziarat” marblematching tiles. He got the chandeliers of the main Library hall designed to original specifications of shining Brass. Many of his favorite students were assigned the task of finding the right items as per specifications set out by him. He chose the paintings to be hung in the library and the Senate hall. The woodwork he supervised himself was matchless. Even the curtains were a reflection of his cultured taste.

He inducted a group of young enthusiastic faculty members whom he personally groomed. He was very concerned about the lack of grooming amongst our medical students and even faculty. The brilliant student body of KE, he felt, lacked many social skills as well as taste for literature and arts. He arranged special classes for students and himself took the responsibility of the faculty. There would be a fortnightly session on poetry, art and music. He would explain aghazal or a painting in such a manner that it would open new vistas of understanding. Attending one of those meetings I came to realize through him the genius of Van Gogh expressed through his paint brush and the reason he used bright colors. It was through his eyes that I was able to see the magical ratio used by Michelangelo and the beauty of great Sculptures that he created.

He loved Persian poetry and because I could understand a bit of Persian he would discuss it with me. This provided me with an opportunity to spend more time with him and get tutored on the finer points of life. He was a fan of Persian ghazals sung by Nashad and took pleasure in explaining the layers of meaning in every couplet.

Getting closer to him helped me understand so many facets of his personality which otherwise no one knew. He was a trained chef and had exemplary culinary skills. He knew my gastronomical preferences and treated me to something savory from his custom built kitchen many times. Replying to a query he astonished us by the fact that he was a certified cordon blue chef. He would direct the cook to make something and when it was brought, he would take a bite first and would only let it be served if it was according to his instructions. He treated culinary skills as an art form. Just like the short stories he wrote; the only difference being that we did not get a chance to read them.

That August evening still haunts me when the terrible heart wrenching news of his demise came. It was sudden, shocking and totally unexpected. That day we not only lost a great teacher and an outstanding physician but an intellectual visionary. He did so much and yet it seems that he could have done so much more. Given more time he could have developed Punjab Human Organ Transplantation Authority (PHOTA) into a world recognized organization. He started training medical professionals in transplantation fundamentals. He was busy in organizing a proper humane, ethical transplantation service for the people of this country. It was a great challenge, and that is what he always craved for. The mundane and the ordinary was not for him.

Today, he lives on through thousands of his students and the millions of lives he has helped to save through them. His legacy of intellectual curiosity, academic excellence and teaching brilliance is not easy to follow but still something to emulate for all of us.

If I only had five minutes,
the day you passed away.

I would have hard time to tell you,
all the things I needed to say.

I never got to tell you,
how much you mean to me.

or that you were the best, that anyone could be.