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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: My story

Everybody has a story. Here is mine.

I tell it for newly minted students who have no idea where life will lead. I tell them “Just let it roll, something good will happen.” Here is how it rolled for me.

I wanted to be a civil engineer, but my application to the school of engineering at the University of Minnesota was waylaid because I did not have the necessary math courses. (Sleepy Eye High did not have a great math curriculum.) By the time I had the necessary courses I had observed engineering students walk into parked cars and trees. I decided engineering was not for me.

Now it is 1956 and I am just getting stamped out with a BA in psychology. Jobs are plentiful. I go to a job fair lined up by the University and sign on with Procter and Gamble to sell toothpaste, or whatever.

A week later or so I am told that the chairman of Biostatistics, Jacob Bearman (Pete to everybody), wants to see me.

Now what? I know it cannot be that I flunked Biostatistics because I have my grade.

I go trembling only to learn that he wants to offer me a fellowship in biostatistics.

“What? You want to offer me a graduate fellowship? I do not think I have the mathematical skills to succeed. You are making a bad bet!”

“You just study. Leave the worrying to me.”

So, what the hell? At least we will be able to eat until I flunk out. In any case, there is always the farm back in Sleepy Eye.

Goodbye Cincinnati.

Now I am a gradual student. Gradual for certain. It took me eight years from when I started before I got to the Big Dance.

Those years on the fellowship were the richest we ever felt. Me on a stipend and my wife working at Northern States Power. We never felt richer.

Wealth is relative.

After a few years in gradual school there comes that dreaded event: Preliminary oral examination.

I was told it is useless to study, but, like every other gradual student, I studied only to learn that it was, indeed, useless.

The night before the exam my wife and I went to a movie. I have no idea what it was about.

Then came the big day. My committee was Joe Berkson from the Mayo Clinic, Paul Meehl, developer of the K scale for the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), my advisor, Richard McHugh, and my minor advisor. Pete Bearman was there as a guest.

It started easy enough with baby questions. About a half hour in or so, Joe Berkson and Paul Meehl get into an argument. I am happy because the clock is running and they are leaving me alone, that is, until one of them asked me what I thought about the point they were arguing. I stuttered around as they drilled in on me. Now I have visions of Elliott Gould dancing on the table when he melted down in his oral exam in "Getting Straight". The only problem was that I could not dance.

When they finished with me I did not know my name. I looked over at Pete. He is ashen. I tried to warn him that he was making a bad bet when he offered me the fellowship. Now he has his proof. But that thought did not make me feel any better about taking my professional father down with me.

Damn!

Finally, the drilling is done and I am excused to pace the floor in the hall while the committee deliberates my fate.

Eventually I am invited back in and told I passed.

"I passed?"

It took me three weeks to recover from the experience.

Now I am ABD so I start the hunt for a dissertation topic. My first topic blew up about three weeks after I settled on it. My second one blew up even faster. I had a take on the third try working on estimation of insulin via immunoassay.

The thing I learned from my dissertation was that $22/3$ is not a good approximation of pi.

The hunt caused me, once I started mentoring students, to urge them to hurry getting topic 1 and 2 so they get to topic 3 and a take.

About a year later or so Chris Klimt comes riding into town. He tells Pete Bearman he is working on starting a diabetes trial (what was to become the UGDP) and that he is looking for a PhD student to work with him. Pete gives him four names, mine among them.

About three weeks later, Pete corners me to tell me that Klimt has talked to three of his referrals but not this Meinert person. Pete wants to know why I did not go to see Klimt.

"I am not interested in a job. I want to finish my dissertation. I see no point in wasting Dr Klimt's time interviewing someone not interested in a job."

"It is rude to not see him. Go talk to him!"

The next thing I know, I have an office beside Klimt's on the 11th floor of the Mayo Building – before the building was air conditioned!

After a year or so Klimt gets new diggings for his office more befitting his stature. The only problem was that because of where the desk was placed, the telephone connection from the wall was now too short. As a result he had to lean towards Jones every time he used the phone.

He goes to the department administrator and asks for the phone people to fix the problem.

Nothing happens. So he asks again a few weeks later.

Again nothing. He waits a few more days and then goes to the administrator and does what he called a “controlled burn”. (I came to recognize them as meltdowns.)

He stomps out of the administrator’s office, climbs in his VW, and heads to Radio Shack to buy a cord. He installs it and now is happy. No more leaning toward Jones to deal with the phone.

A few days later I see Klimt and the department chair toe-to-toe exchanging “words”. I stay low.

A few days later Klimt shows up at our house about 7:30 in the evening. (I came to hate it when he showed up unannounced because I knew it was not for social calls.) He tells me he is leaving for the University of Maryland Medical School in Baltimore and wants me to come along. I say I do not want to go because I want to finish my dissertation.

Next thing I know we are in Baltimore. Me, my wife, and young daughter.

A few days after getting there I am outside surveying the layout with my wife. I tell her “We will stay a little while, but I do not want to wake up dead in Baltimore”.

I know now that I will wake up dead in Baltimore.

People in Baltimore said “You are not from these parts”.

“Why?”

“You talk with an accent.”

“Accent?”

Just because I call soda, pop?

I hunker down doing my job. Eventually Klimt tires of the administrative encumbrances of the School of Medicine and decides to establish his own nest -- The Maryland Medical Research Institute (MMRI).

Again he wants me to move with him. I do, albeit reluctantly, because, by now I know I can not live by clinical trials alone.

I am frustrated that there are various coordinating centers doing trials but there is no dialog among them. All inventing the wheel by themselves. I start organizing annual meetings of coordinating centers that were ultimately to lead to the first journal devoted to trials and later morph into the Society for Clinical Trials.

It was around then that I got the “bug”. The book writing bug. I had a hankering to write a text on the design and conduct of trials.

I took a six month sabbatical. By the time the six months were up, I had accomplished nothing. Nothing! But the bug was gone! I knew book writing was not for me.

By then I had enough of a reputation to be called an “expert”. I hated that because I knew the definition. A horses ass, with a briefcase full of slides, over 100 miles from home. I wonder what it is now with slides gone?

For a year or so I had two offices; one at MMRI and the other in the School of Medicine. But anybody who has ever had two offices, knows that is one too many, so eventually I departed MMRI.

Sometime in 1978 I got a call from Leon Gordis, chair of the Department of Epidemiology at Hopkins. He said he wanted to come talk.

I said “Come ahead”.

By the time he left he gave a pitch for me to come to Hopkins.

I thanked him for the offer but said I was happy where I was.

“Just think about it. I will call you in a month or so.”

By the time Leon showed up I had long since given up on finding the perfect spot of green grass. I was content with just finding the least brown patch.

After Leon left and I started looking around, I saw a lot of brown. Maybe it was less brown at Hopkins?

We had just gotten a new chair at Maryland and I knew it was not a match made in heaven.

Eventually I got to worrying that Leon would not call. I knew I would not call because you never want to let them see you sweat.

But, true to his word, he called and I moved across town.

A few years after I had settled in and knew where most of the skeletons were buried, I got a call from Abe Lillienfeld. The previous chair of the department,

He was on the editorial board for Oxford University Press and looking for somebody to write a text on design and conduct of trials. He thought I would be perfect for the job.

I figured my sabbatical about a decade back and failed attempt at writing would have immunized me against the writing bug, but I was wrong. Eventually I took the bait and started writing again. This time with more success with the effort resulting in “Clinical Trials: Design, Conduct, and Analysis (1986).

While that was going on, one of the trials we started was a multicenter Glaucoma Laser Trial. The project officer, Anita Suran, was impressed with how we did things and she started badgering me to apply for a training grant from the National Eye Institute so we could train students in the art form.

The idea of having gradual students did not appeal to me so I ignored the badgering but the next thing I know is that I have toads to teach how to jump. I soon realized it is an empty set. If a toad does not know how to jump you cannot teach it how to jump and if it knows how to jump there is nothing more to teach it.

In the late eighties Al Sommer, dean of the school (my beer drinking buddy after he got his HBD certificate; has been dean) encouraged me to create a center for clinical trials. Centers in academic institutions are like what Alben Barkley (VP for Harry Truman) said vice presidents are worth, so why not? You supply the money and then all you need is a brochure, letterhead, and ribbon cutting ceremony. We had money and the other three things so we became a center, now named the Center for Clinical Trials and Evidence Synthesis and now with a curriculum for training toads.

So, in the words of Bubba Blue in Forest Gump, “that’s about it”.

My story from a HBT.