



JOHNS HOPKINS
BLOOMBERG
SCHOOL of PUBLIC HEALTH

Department of Epidemiology
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
415 N. Washington Street, 2nd Floor
Baltimore, Maryland 21231

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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: Things I miss

In my younger years I backpacked to relive the experience in the comforts of home.

You cannot spend your entire life doing, writing, and talking about trials and then retire without missing the experience. Even after retirement I came into the office for contact, but I gave that up with COVID. Now I am discovering what I miss.

Classroom teaching

Teaching is a unique mixture of imparting knowledge about the chosen subject matter and entertainment. To feel engaged you need a live audience sitting on the edges of their chairs waiting for the next pearl to drop. Virtual or remote teaching compared to classroom teaching is like talking to the wall.

Face-to-face meetings

There are things that happen when people are together that do not happen in conference or Zoom calls. When it comes to interaction, both are like remote cocktail parties.

The telephone

Some of my rants have been about the telephone, akin to what Henry Higgins had to say about the pest from Budapest in “You Did It” from My Fair Lady.

Every time we looked around
There he was, that hairy hound From Budapest.
Never leaving us alone,
Never have I ever known a ruder pest.

When the phone rung at home with my wife in charge everything stopped. No matter what. But its demise in the workplace is unfortunate, because other than letters (a lost art form), it is the only direct means of contact.

Early in my work life the phone never stopped ringing. In my last years it never rung – done in by texting and emailing, more aseptic means of communicating.

Story telling

Every now and again you have to spin a yarn. I got nervous when I saw students taking notes about a yarn I was spinning.

What is life without a few stories? Years back when Thad Prout and I were working on a paper for the UGDP, we met evenings in his office. He in his office befitting a department chair and me in the outer office in a squeaky chair too small for me.

Every now and again we would argue about some point in the paper. If we could not agree on a resolution I would wheel my squeaky chair into his office and spin a story how we would solve the conflict in Sleepy Eye. Over the three months or so there were several such interludes.

About a year later Thad comes to me and says “My God there really is a Sleepy Eye” (having discovered it browsing a Minnesota map).

Mentoring students

During my tenure at Hopkins I mentored 27 doctoral students. Like your kids, they were all different. The gift of mentoring is that you get to see life through their eyes. Students keep you young!

Arguing

Arguing (different than fighting). You walk away as friends in an argument and as enemies in a fight. Argue all you want, but go easy on the fighting because it is lasting.

I grew up around arguers and BSers. You had to figure out when you were being handed a line. Arguing was an art form. I grew up arguing with my father, either side of an issue. May be why I was on the debate team in high school?

Bumping into people

The thing I enjoyed about my years in the School was running into people in the halls or in eateries in the School. You never knew where the interactions would lead; sometimes to lasting collaborations.

The people I worked with

There are lots, but in the school special mentions goes to Watson (Betty Collison), Mark Van Natta, Michele Donithan, and Milana Isaacson.

Watson was my right hand for many years. What she said went (usually).

Mark Van Natta was an analyst, fun to argue with. His office was next to Michele Donithan’s, a data systems person. Usually the doors were open so we could see if we could get a rise out of her by what we said. We had a good batting average.

Milana Isaacson was one door down from Mark. I usually stopped in after my visit with Mark. Milana was my Yiddish teacher. I grew up surrounded by Germans, primarily from Bavaria so I knew some of the terms. Just not where they came from.

I am grateful to Milana for my cultural education.