



## My story

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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 walking into trees while working their slide rules. 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 signed on with Procter and Gamble.

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

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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 fellowship in biostatistics? I do not think I have the mathematical skills to succeed. You are making a bad bet!”

“You 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.

Those years on the fellowship were the richest we ever felt. Me on a stipend and my wife working at Northern States Power.

After a few years in gradual school there comes that dreaded event: Preliminary oral examination. “Preliminary” because it is the first of two oral exams. The second comes after you finish your dissertation, years after the preliminary exam.

The terrifying exam is the first one. The second one is about your dissertation and is usually a piece of cake. You have to work to fail it. The first one can be about anything and you can come belly up in it.

I was told it is useless to study, but 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

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Inventory (MMPI), my advisor, Richard McHugh, and my minor advisor, James Jenkins. Pete Bearman was there as a nonvoting 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 of the point being argued. 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 had 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. Part of the ritual.

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 and therein lies another story.

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The dissertation hunt caused me, once I started mentoring students, to urge them to hurry getting topics 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 he is working on starting a diabetes trial (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. Pete tells me of Klimt and that he gave him my name.

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

“I am not interested in a job. I want to finish my dissertation. Then I will hunt for a job. I see no point in wasting Dr Klimt’s time interviewing someone not interested in his 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 11<sup>th</sup> floor of the Mayo Building – before the building was air conditioned!

After a year or so Klimt gets new office digs, more befitting his stature. The only problem was that where his desk was, the telephone connection was too short. As a result he had to lean far to the right every time he used the phone.

He goes to the department administrator for a fix to 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 stomped out of the office, climbs in his VW, and heads to Radio Shack to buy a cord. He installs it and now is happy. No more leaning to right for the phone!

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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 a social call.) 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 first.

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

A few days after getting there I am 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 there 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); 600 Wyndhurst Avenue.

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

By then there were various coordinating centers for trials, but no dialog among them. All busy inventing the wheel by themselves.

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So I started organizing meetings of coordinating centers that ultimately to lead to the first journal devoted to trials and later morphed 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 textbook on the design and conduct of trials.

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

By that time 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 in the Division of Epidemiology and Biostatistics. But anybody who has ever had two offices, knows that is at least 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.

“Come ahead”.

By the time he left he pitched for me to come to Hopkins.

I thanked him 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 just finding the least brown spot.

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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 him 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 Lilienfeld. The previous chair of the department at Hopkins.

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 mini-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 we started the 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 to train students in the art form.

The idea of having gradual students did not appeal to me so I ignored the badgering, until I took the bait.

Next thing I know is that I have toads (aka gradual students) to teach how to jump.

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In the late eighties Al Sommer, dean of the school (my beer drinking buddy) started encouraging 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 – a warm bucket of spit. You supply the money, produce a brochure, have a ribbon cutting ceremony and you have a center.

So, in the words of Bubba Blue in Forest Gump, “that’s about it” (after an endless recitation of shrimp recipes).

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