Referring nowadays to Richard Asher, it is often necessary to characterize him as the father of Jane. No bad thing, I think, to be remembered as the father of somebody so talented, but to my generation he is remembered as a teacher, clinician and the author of highly original essays, helpful lessons for young doctors, collected posthumously as ‘Talking Sense’ and making a useful Christmas present for one’s house physician in the days when such colleagues existed. If my memory serves, it would have been about 1966 when my Chief, John Robertson, invited his juniors to lunch with Richard Asher in Liverpool, where he had been taking part in a teaching ritual with the senior students. Asher sat at the head of the table and held us in thrall with his anecdotes, his reminiscences and his wit. Even our senior registrar, later to be Regius Professor in an ancient university, seemed lost for words. Hardly anyone else spoke.

Richard Asher was a great teacher and certainly I learnt from his writings. Now that I am older than he was, I often meet younger colleagues who remind me that I taught them. After smiling a smile sometimes intended to disguise failure to recognize them, I ask them what, in particular, it was that I taught them. I am afraid the usual response indicates that what they remember is the fact of being taught rather than the content. And I ask myself, what do I remember that my teachers taught me, what information that I have retained matches a face, personality and manner of a teacher? As a physician, what such influences have helped to form me? Through what medium was the influence transmitted? Why is one teacher recalled rather than another? If it seems a little late to be asking these questions, when most of my teaching career is behind me, you will have to take it from me that I have been asking them for a long time but have only just got round to writing it down.

The media of transmission I have in mind are example, conversation, lecture and writing. To a young doctor or medical student, I hope example still plays a large part in moving teaching into memory. Who among us does not recall admiring the technique, the human sympathy, the inquisitiveness, the manner of some of our teachers? We perhaps recall little specific that they taught but remember the man or woman in their interaction with us and their patients and our resolve to try to emulate them. Equally, who does not recall the crude misfit of a doctor who seemed to have contempt for his (rarely her) patients and regarded them (and sometimes colleagues) as a necessary inconvenience on the path to making money. Such were equally, perhaps more, influential. Next, to the positive role model add conversation, in this case bedside teaching and tutorials. So easy to get it wrong, to show off, to gloss over ignorance, to fail to prepare; but to get it right depends on developing an empathy with those being taught, to have a clear message and to excite curiosity. This combination of humanity and skill at conversational teaching is what has made some of my teachers last in my memory.

Lecturing and writing come into a different category, since we do not need to meet their practitioners in order to be influenced by them. In my childhood, much of the population of Britain was subjected to a sermon once a week in church, and as a student two lectures each day were the norm. Then they lasted an hour, but now we are advised to keep our lectures >40 min as young people cannot concentrate for longer. Could we as youngsters? I doubt it, though it certainly depended on the content and manner of delivery. I must have heard many hundreds of sermons and can recall very few. Two, in particular, still stick in mind after 55 years. In one, given the week I first learnt of the beautiful concept of Darwinian evolution, the preacher coincidentally chose to hold the human eye as an example of the wonder of creation; how could such a structure have evolved? Confused in my adolescent mind, I went to my father’s copy of Huxley and Wells’ ‘The Science of Life’ and found...
a clear description of ocular evolution. How surprising that this old Victorian argument is still alive in the USA. The second sermon gave us advice on tests to apply to a potential wife; visit early in the morning (those were more innocent times) to see how she looked; have a good look at her mother, as she would turn into her; take her on a stormy sea trip to see what she was like when ill. We were all boys and I leave it to you to speculate what tests he would have advised girls to take.

What was it about these two sermons, among so many, that registered so indelibly? I think it must have been the element of surprise, the completely unexpected; in one case the authoritative delivery of a certainty contradicting the evidence so recently presented on evolution, in the other deviation from the inevitable spiritual message into the dangerously secular. I learnt early on that surprise in lectures helps to convey an important message and use it in mine to this day. Of those many undergraduate lectures, I clearly recall only one although I picked up information from many; the remembered one also contained a surprise. It was given by our professor of medicine, Lord Cohen (that was the surprise, as he rarely lectured to us). He was the first to point out to me that curative medicine made only a small contribution to public health and recommended a recently published book, ‘The Mirage of Health’ by René Dubos. I read it and it has coloured my thinking ever since. Dubos worked with Waksman on the discovery of streptomycin, lost his young wife to tuberculosis and became a noted philosopher of medicine. How important it has been to me to grasp the concept that these soil biologists were working on, that all the organisms on the planet are part of a complex and interdependent network of life, each with our own ecological niche to defend.

As for writers as teachers, I suppose that most of our factual (as far as we know at the moment) knowledge comes from our reading. The day of the readable textbook, the Paul Wood, the Sheila Sherlock, the Crofton and Douglas, distilling the writer’s knowledge of the medical literature through the condenser of his or her great experience, combining science and common sense, seems alas to be over. Archie Cochrane, that most sceptical of men, would smile wryly at the gospel of meta-analysis that has sprung up in his name in determining how we as physicians should behave. Farewell, imagination, goodbye flair. Consider this true scenario, observed during an MRCP examination:

Patient: I have found taking these herbal pills helps my arthritis. What do you think, doctor?

Candidate: I wouldn’t take them. They won’t do any good.

Examiner (me) Don’t you think that if the patient is perceiving benefit, she may be obtaining it?

Candidate. Nowadays we have to base our advice on the results of controlled trials. There is no evidence herbal pills work.

It made me think of this scenario, perhaps a bit dramatised:

Patient: I find that drinking this herbal tea seems to help. What do you think doctor?

Doctor: If it helps, keep taking it and I’ll call back to see how you are getting one. I’m afraid I’ve nothing better to offer.

Patient: Thank you, Dr Withering.

Should I have failed him, I wonder? I did not, as I expect he was simply relating what he had been taught and believed to be the truth, but he was committing one of Asher’s seven sins of medicine, Common Stupidity. I was pleased to hear that the short piece I wrote about this in the BMJ (There’s none so blind as the double blind) is being used in some medical schools.

To return to lunch with Richard Asher—one trick he used often in his essays was the introduction of an apt verse. Several times he quoted Kipling:

’I keep six honest serving men (They taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and When And How and Where and Who.’

And once, WS Gilbert:

‘On fire that glows with heat intense I turn the hose of common sense And out it goes at small expense.’

This last quotation might define much of his writing. This use of verse provides additional surprise and increases the impact of a lecture or paper. But, although he spoke almost without stopping for 2 h, I am afraid I cannot recall a thing he said at that lunch.

Anthony Seaton

References