Memorial from Joel Sercarz

Sometime in the early 1960s, the committee to Honor and Emulate Louis Pasteur (HELP) was a subject of some press coverage in Boston. Actually, there was no committee, just my father, Eli Sercarz, who felt that the potholes on Avenue Louis Pasteur, his route to his postdoctoral lab, needed some very serious attention. He had a lot of creative energy and ideas and it made for an upbringing without any dull moments.

My father was enthusiastic about so many things and had tremendous energy. He approached his interests with a sense of playful fun. Whether it was travel to far-flung places, the long-suffering Dodgers, exotic and pungent cheeses, his wife Raby, or driving with excessive speed, he had many passions. As for speeding, he almost lost his license after buying a fast Subaru, driving a manual transmission well into his sixties. He had less interest in keeping deadlines, being highly organized in a conventional way, having perfectly groomed hair, maintaining his car, or understanding Republican ideals.

Dad and I ended up sharing an obsession with the Dodgers, and in 1969, we started attending baseball games together. That year, I was 9 years old, and the home team won each of the six games I attended at Dodger Stadium. When Dodger pitching star Claude Osteen was hoping for his 20th victory on the second to last game of the season, my father wrote a “Special Delivery” (45-cent stamp) letter to Osteen stating that if he would simply call his son on the phone, I would attend that game and he would surely win. I was beyond shocked when Claude, a star Major Leaguer, called me the afternoon of the climactic game and we had a brief chat. Dad and I attended the game and Osteen won his 20th game that night, a big deal in pro baseball. The next morning, a local paper wrote the following headline: “Fan, 9, helps Gomer [Osteen’s nickname] apply whammy.”

We remained big fans thereafter. Much later, he told me that as his cancer progressed he wrote a letter to the Dodgers’ general manager stressing the urgent need to trade immediately for an effective

pitcher. “The time is now,” he said, as he wasn’t going to live too many more seasons!

Traveling was a constant and we had some great times on the road, frequently around immunology meetings. Skiing in Park City and Squaw Valley were highlights, along with numerous trips to Europe. We spent two full years in Europe during his sabbatical years, in England and France, and those times widened my worldview substantially. His boundless energy was ideal for traveling, and he had a great memory for small museums, obscure sights, and local restaurants from previous journeys.

From 1982 until the early 1990s, I was training at UCLA for my career in otolaryngology and he worked at UCLA Life Sciences. I could visit him by taking an indoor bridge to his office without even going outside. This access ensured the extremely close bond that we always had would continue. He would drop whatever he was doing so we could have some time together. I relied on his advice and wisdom so much that I feel a little adrift since he passed away, although I am getting older and have lots of life experience of my own.

For his last 35 years, he lived in Topanga Canyon. There were occasional fires in the area, and I remember looking at the distant smoke and hearing his frustration that he would never get his latest NIH grant in on time. As usual, he completed projects late and procrastinated as long as possible. Seemingly, a lightbulb went off in his mind and he realized that surely the NIH would give him an extra week with a raging fire near his home! His excuse worked, and he felt that the fire, although tragic for many, had perfect timing.

In this election season, I am reminded of his firmly left-leaning politics. He had canvassed the neighborhood for George McGovern in 1972 and couldn’t believe that our neighbors “trusted Nixon more.” Although there is now a clear consensus that the second Iraq war was a misguided disaster, he held this view from the very start. When there was a boycott of French goods related to the French being

unwilling to allow our military to use their airspace, he did the opposite. He told restaurant servers that he would only drink French wine. A lonely one-man protest! I suspect that Donald Trump would have driven him virtually crazy with ideas such as reduction of healthcare access and denial of climate change. The reduction of immigration would have been another sore spot, as he trained dozens of

foreign scholars over the years. He would be 86 now and no doubt as intelligent, witty, and opinionated as always.

I would like to give my warmest regards to all the immunologists, students, and other trainees that are reading this tribute. He loved science and immunology very much and had many, many close friends in the field.