John L. Fahey: A Man of Many Talents

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ABSTRACT: John L. Fahey was an accomplished scientist who contributed greatly to immunological research at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and beyond. He was also a master mentor and teacher who cared a great deal for the welfare of his trainees and rejoiced in their successes.

I. PERSPECTIVES

My encounter with John L. Fahey was serendipitous: an event not meant to happen and, yet, it did. The time was December 1971 and I had just arrived in New York from Israel to begin a postdoctoral fellowship in immunology at a prestigious laboratory, to discover to my dismay that the position I had been offered was available only for American-born physicians, which I was not.

Faced with this most unwelcomed predicament I reached out to the late Dr. Elliot Osserman, a well-known hematologist-immunologist at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. I had been introduced to Dr. Osserman by the head of the internal medicine department at which I worked in Israel. “I have just returned from Los Angeles after reviewing John’s Fahey’s program,” he told me as I finished sharing with him my frustrating and embarrassing story. “He is well funded. Why don’t you call him up? He may be able to help you.” After answering a number of Dr. Fahey’s pointed questions, he asked me to “call back in a week, Jacob, and I’ll let you know whether I have a position for you.”

I remember drawing a blank. The question felt preposterous, coming out of left field. I could barely figure out what I was going to do the next week let alone five or 10 years later. I did not know how to even begin to respond to such a query. Here I was, a 26-year-old young physician struggling to figure out how to become a competent researcher, dedicating my energies fully to what was
at stake at the moment and he was asking me to sketch out my future for him. In retrospect, though, I realize that when John asked me about my future, he was in fact asking also about his own future, figuring out the programs he would like to see developed, the strategies he would need to apply, the physical and financial resources he needed to acquire and, most importantly, the human capital needed to succeed.

For many years, I thought of John as the consummate scientist he had been during the first part of his career: a man dedicated to figuring out important questions in the field of tumor immunology and advancing this important field of inquiry. And although he never lost this focus, I realize now that that had stopped being his main goal then. John had reached a stage in his career at which he saw himself more as an architect: a builder tasked with designing programs, establishing centers and departments in the hospital and medical school, and acquiring resources and facilities for the benefit of the young aspiring scientists under his tutelage and all the young and established investigators in the medical center for whom these resources and facilities would help advance their individual careers.

The assets John brought to UCLA were numerous and of great importance. They created all at once a work environment that was positive, enriching, creative; one that fostered the coming together of individuals with diverse talents, interests, and skills to complement one another, hopefully synergizing and enhancing the quality and reach of their work.

In the course of the 20 years that we were colleagues at UCLA Medical School, I witnessed John promote the establishment of the bone marrow transplantation program there as well as the department of clinical immunology and allergy, both of which were headed by postdoctoral fellows from his research program. He also funded and staffed a clinical immunology research laboratory that served all investigators associated with his program as well as other investigators at the Medical Center needing immunological testing for their patients and hospital staff. He sought and obtained funding for a Center for Interdisciplinary Research in immunological Disorders (CIRID) that brought together Ph.D. immunologists and physician/scientists from different departments and institutes who were interested in a diversity of immunologically mediated medical disorders. This center enhanced communication among them, broadened their understanding of their field, and encouraged collaboration when mutually beneficial. He was also instrumental in developing and acquiring funding for a robust program in psychoneuroimmunology and spearheaded the establishment of a multidisciplinary approach for the investigation and treatment of HIV/AIDS that made important contributions to the understanding of this challenging illness.

Sometime during the late 1980s, my research interests veered away from academic work, and I decided to retire from university life to pursue these new areas of intellectual concern. And although this precluded me from continuing to collaborate with John, it served to promote what became a rich, rewarding personal relationship.

For the last two decades preceding John’s passing, he and I met with some regularity to discuss not our next research venture but rather our personal challenges, dilemmas, and crises and the way in which we were managing them. It was during this period that his preoccupation and worry about the welfare of his beloved wife heightened, causing him great grief. Having become more attuned to the importance that the experience of illness has on the sufferer, I visited his wife a few times in an effort to assist her in adjusting to the effects of her illness and worked with John in finding ways that he could support her best. During this stage of our relationship, I was privileged to witness the emergence of a new side of John, a side that was more psychologically minded, intrigued by the intricacies of the inner life and the processes of psyche. It was a side that motivated him to begin seeking out family members to reconnect and rekindle the flame of kinship. It was a side able that allowed him to connect to feelings and talk about them comfortably.

In the final years of John’s tenure at UCLA, we met at the faculty center either for lunch or early supper. I also would see him at the December parties that my wife and I gave to celebrate the end of the year and the coming of a new one. He often came with his daughter Marguerite and seemed to enjoy seeing and catching up with old trainees and colleagues.
Looking back at the body of work that John left behind, I cannot help but marvel at the breadth of his accomplishments and their enduring value. John was indeed a gifted scientist who spearheaded the development of the field of immunology, but he was also a gifted craftsman, a visionary, a wonderful mentor and teacher, and a man dedicated to bringing opportunity to others. Above all, though, he was a real gentleman: a mensch. It was a privilege and honor to know him, to have learned a great deal from him, and to have gained his trust and friendship.

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