



Director's Corner

Remembering H. Jack Geiger, a Role Model and Troublemaker I wish I Had Known

By Adina Kalet, MD, MPH

It was with deep regret that I read his obituary because I never had the courage to get to know [H. Jack Geiger](#) as a person. Despite having him as a role model for decades, I missed the opportunity to have him as a mentor or friend, and I am poorer for it.

Geiger, a graduate of UW–Madison, Case Western Reserve, and Harvard, was a physician, civil rights and antiwar activist, journalist, and founder of social medicine in the US. He made lots of “good trouble” in his life. He believed that physicians must use their full capacities, their knowledge and skills, and the moral authority that comes with the profession, to improve the social and geopolitical conditions that threatened health.

Dr. Geiger died this past December, after living for almost a century. While I knew some of his story, the obituaries – and there were many including a [beautiful one](#) in the *New England Journal of Medicine* – pointed out that he excelled at being an iconoclastic rabble rouser. They describe how he was, more than once, sanctioned by his medical institutions for speaking out to “raise the bar” for our profession, but he persistent none–the–less.

He was not like most of us. A preternaturally brilliant, child of immigrant German Jewish parents, who were a physician (dad), and a scientist (mom), he finished high school at fourteen and ran away from home (with his parents' permission!), to live in Harlem among actors, musicians, and the celebrated authors of the time. He entered the University of Wisconsin as undergraduate

and wrote for the *Capital Times* in Madison before he was eighteen years old. He never took any straight paths, following his instincts and his strong moral compass.

Both Dr. Geiger and I began at the Sophie Davis School for Biomedical Education (now the City University of New York Medical School) in 1978. I was a college freshman, and he a remarkably accomplished physician, social activist and newly minted Arthur C. Logan Professor of Community Medicine. I wish I had invited him for a cup of coffee or a beer. I never considered it; it was too intimidating and I was convinced he would be “too busy”. Later, I wish I had visited him at his home in Brooklyn during his last decades when he stopped traveling, became frail, and had failing vision. I certainly could have. I am now certain that he would have made time to talk with me. He might have even enjoyed meeting a former student. But I never called. Instead, I took the easier route and had conversations and debates with him in my head. It is hard to learn anything that way!

The problem of being afraid of our role models is this: they remain on pedestals and exist mostly in our imaginations. We try to understand them and learn from their examples. We watch them and read about them, but we never know them in their full humanity, warts and all.

Of course, this “hero at a distance” is often all that is available to us. Our role models may not be proximate. They may be long gone, or they may be entirely fictional. But I now believe that if opportunities arise to transform role models into mentors, one should take full advantage, even though there might be risks. To truly know a remarkable person is invaluable, and the privilege to be known by someone who has done heroic things is rare.

When I was in college, we knew only vaguely of his many accomplishments to that point, (he had yet to win his two Nobel Prizes) and we were way too self-absorbed and naïve to truly appreciate how unusual a physician he was. Although we heard him lecture occasionally, we were largely unaware of what a character, in *all* the senses of that word, he was. Boy, did we miss out!

In fact, he was redefining what it *meant to be a physician* just as we were working very hard to become one. His example was destabilizing to our nascent professional identity formation. The lessons he represented, the moral exemplar he was, were lost on most of us. Admittedly, it might have been difficult for us to truly appreciate what he had to teach us early in our careers, but we should have tried. Missing that opportunity was a great loss. Had we taken the risk and made the effort, we would have been the richer for it.

How might my medical school have taken better advantage of this giant walking amongst us? I think there are “curriculum” lessons in this. In addition to the occasional lectures from him and about his work, the book chapters and *New York Times* editorials he wrote (but which we weren’t obligated to read), there should have been a way to understand him beyond the “hero” stories. Had we found ways to engage with him meaningfully as a person, it would have humanized this intimidating, moral exemplar and, perhaps, provided us each with more detailed career maps. What a remarkable “leadership training” program it might have been to talk with him informally, to hear his personal stories, his journey, and his views on his own coming of age! Besides reading about his work and hearing him speak, we would have been able to bring our questions, comments, and fears to him.

It is also possible we might have been disappointed. That’s okay. After all, no role model is perfect. Many are not even particularly gifted in interpersonal skills. There might have been confrontations and rebukes. He might have initiated intellectual debates that rose well over our college-educated heads. This was a man who talked with Langston Hughes as a 14-year-old! But, had we the courage to engage, we might have learned more of what he had to offer in ways that would have challenged us and given our own embryonic careers direction.

It is also true that he might have been too overwhelmingly engaged in other activities to be part of such a curriculum. Although he was only in his mid 50s when he came to the Sophie Davis School, he had already traveled to South Africa where he had studied their community health centers. He then brought

this approach to the Mississippi Delta, sparking a movement that is credited with bringing basic health care access to tens of millions of Americans. At the same time, he was co-founding two Nobel Prize winning organizations, Physicians for Human Rights and Physicians for Social Responsibility. Sometimes, role models must be just that and nothing more; they have work to do and we should watch from the sidelines and take notes.

The “writing prescriptions for food” lecture

Every year, we gathered for the same “Geiger Lecture,” where he told the story of his work in rural Mississippi. The most memorable section was when he described the political battle into which he was drawn when funders realized that the program was writing, and then the federally subsidized community health center pharmacy was filling, prescriptions for food. Every year he delivered the same punch line, describing how he won the battle. *“I told them,”* he said, *“the last time I checked my textbooks, the specific therapy for malnutrition was, in fact, food.”*

I am ashamed to say that my classmates and I rolled our eyes at this story, much like children sigh at the Thanksgiving table when Grandpa tells the same stories every year. But these stories are our legacy and, at the risk of boring the children, it is through the frequent retelling of these “hero stories” that communal values are transmitted. Of course, now I want to know more. *Was he scared or anxious when he need to confront those with the authority to stop his important work? How had he prepared? What would he have done if they had pulled the funding?* I would have wanted to hear about his failures and how he dealt with those. But now I cannot.

When my son was little, he was absolutely enthralled with superheroes (still is, I think). Batman and Superman costumes were festooned throughout our home, red capes and black masks everywhere. Through our many conversations about the thoughts and feelings of his role models, we landed on the conclusion that it was easier to know what the right thing to do was than to actually do it. Our maxim became, *“courage means being scared but doing the right thing*

anyway.” It would have taken courage to reach out and insisted that H. Jack Geiger talk with me, but the privilege to have known him better would likely have been worth the effort.

I will be reaching out more and connecting with my heroes. And the Kern Institute will do what it can to create proximity with the “s/heros” of our times, to the benefit of our students, our trainees, and ourselves.

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