

To: A Memorandum to Future Generations in the Department of Epidemiology  
From: Berton H. Kaplan, Ph.D.  
Re: Dedication of the John C. Cassel, MD., MPH., Epidemiology Conference Room  
Date: October 21, 1998

I am honored to make a few comments at the dedication of the John C. Cassel, MD. Conference Room. You are familiar with John the “founder” (along with Sidney Kark), John the nurturing mentor, John the great teacher, John the scholar, John the passionate Public Health Advocate, and John the gifted synthesizer. In important ways, his insistence on teaching introductory epidemiology was his academic sonata that expressed all these talents.

There are sides to his talents not often mentioned in his legacy. My remarks are restricted to John the gifted contrarian and to other sides of his complex presence.

First, John enjoyed and invited challenges. For example, if faculty discussions and decisions did not meet with debate, he would often invite John Fulton to play the devil’s advocate.

Second, he invited me—a most junior member of the faculty—to meet with him once a week to talk about the intersections of sociology and epidemiology, and to discuss papers in process. This process lasted for ten years. The agenda at times put me in the role of teacher or consultant, other time’s collaborator, all the time a rare and rich education for me. In this process, friendly but serious differences were debated. Although junior, I was treated as an equal. It was his way of reminding us of the purpose of a university.

Third, his tolerance for diversity of talents made it possible for me to reject a tenure track appointment at Cornell. I told him that my talents probably did not fit the usual epidemiology department. He kept telling me that in a university and in a good department there must be room for many talents. His phone calls and his request that the Dean and Chancellor call lured me to return from Cornell. This event I remember with enduring gratitude to a truly “alive” scholar and friend.

Fourth, he was someone with whom you could have a serious conflict over scholarly and training issues. Again, I was just past junior status in this semi military structure. I had proposed a postdoctoral program in social epidemiology. He wanted pre-doctoral level students. I felt that the better career choices went to those with a Ph.D. or equivalent. I lost that fight. But it was a debate that took place with some mutual pain. Such a debate can only take place with someone who really respects and nurtures colleagues, and who is at home with useful conflict.

It is true that he could dominate the conversation in an empty room. Yet in his office was a wall hanging facing his desk. It read: Have you silenced anyone today? Such a set of attitudes reflect both his strong/healthy ego, and his sense of humility.

Fifth, he was open to frank discussions that dealt with conscience. Once, I profoundly disagreed with a decision. An hour later, I was back in his office to talk more. Finally, he agreed to a compromise that satisfied us both. He promised to “make it right”. The return of his illness overtook implementing that decision. I still have a note of regret about that event written in that last month of his illness. I am sharing my sense of man with real integrity.

The poet Rod McKuen was writing about people like John:

“Think of all the men who never knew the answers  
Think of all those who never even could.  
Still there are some who ask why  
Who want to know, who dare to try”

In summary, remember the advice from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—the priest scientist—in notes found after his death: “A Presence is never mute”.