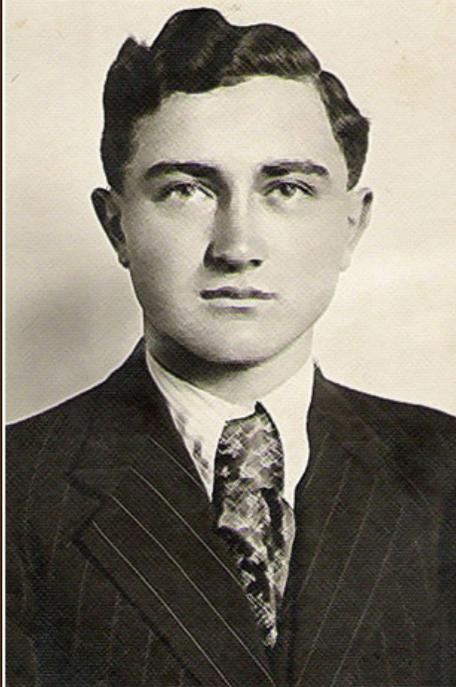




THE DOCTOR'S FATHER



AN EXTRAORDINARY MAN: SIMON SCHAMAN 1925 - 2012

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When I awoke on the morning of Thursday, May 3, 2012, after an even shorter night than usual, I would never have imagined what the next 24 hours would bring. That I would not sleep again until the evening of Friday, May 4 would not have been a total surprise, as I have from time to time been known to be captured by a late-night task or project that engrossed me until I was brought to my senses by the early morning light. But on this occasion the events and my experience were most extraordinary, accompanied by a range of insights and feelings that even now make me feel overwhelmed. Thereafter, everything blended together in what I can best describe as a “dreamlike state”, and I feared, as with many dreams, that my recollection would dissipate as time went on. I felt it necessary to make notes and to share this with my daughters, so they would have a better understanding of who their grandfather, Simon Schaman, really was. As I delved into the project I realized I should also share this with my mother, my sister, my nephews, other relatives, friends, and those who might have an interest, including some of the many thousands of patients at my medical clinic that my father had touched over the years.

When I received the phone call, at around noon, from my father’s doctor, I was informed my father had slipped into a state of sudden deterioration, the cause of which was not totally clear. I was told it resembled a stroke, however, the usual signs were not evident. What mattered most was that he was in serious respiratory distress and he was decompensating. Nothing could be done for him. He was dying. The stark reality of this was rather shattering. His history of Parkinson’s disease, of more than 10 years, had remained extremely stable with only slight deterioration over the long term. Although his decline had accelerated over the past year, and more so over the last few months, this news was not expected. I cancelled my office for the rest of the day, something I had done on only rare occasions since working at my clinic in the last 34 years.

When I arrived at his bedside it was shocking to see how he had deteriorated in the hours since I had last seen him the previous evening. He suddenly looked much older, his arms moved slightly in a rather agitated fashion, and he was struggling to breathe. My mother, his devoted wife and partner of 63 years, was shaken, but clung to the belief that he would come out of this. She had voiced previously her conviction that he would outlive her, as “he has such a strong heart”. Certainly his long-term dedication to regular exercise and nutrition had served him well. He had done everything possible to look after himself, but it appeared his time had come.

Fortunately, three of his five grandchildren were able to be at his bedside on the eve of his death. Two of my three daughters travelled from Toronto and Hamilton, with the third frustrated in New York City, unable to catch the last evening flight to Toronto. One of my two nephews grieved with us at the bedside, with the second stuck several hours away, on a work project,

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without transportation. Fortunately he had been able to visit the night before, and as usual, exhibited the great support of his grandparents that he had provided in their ageing and ailing years. The anguish of the missing two was felt by all of us at the bedside.

As the evening wore on, it was clear that the outcome was inevitable. His breathing became more agitated, only temporarily relieved by the injections and supportive care of the nurses. After several hours, the grandchildren left and I urged my mother to get some rest, as she was going to need all her strength in the coming hours. By 10 pm I was alone with my father, with only the occasional visit from the extremely compassionate nursing staff.

I have often heard it said that when on one's deathbed, on the verge of death, that one experiences flashbacks and relives the experiences of a lifetime. In many ways, that is what I experienced as I sat at my father's deathbed. Recollections resurfaced of experiences that I had long forgotten. I recalled the countless weekends that he took me along to the property he had purchased "in the country" near Maryhill, which would eventually become our family home, and far into the future, would become the site of my medical clinic. Who would have thought that eventually more than 45,000 patients would frequent this property in pursuit of medical therapy and in a quest for better health? When he purchased the 33 acre property in the 50's, it was swampland and relatively useless. He saw a potential that others didn't. Or possibly, no one could comprehend or accept the work that would be required to realize his vision. As a youngster, I don't think I ever had the realization that my father actually had a goal or plan. The weekend trips to the country became a routine that I didn't question. Where this was all going was not something I ever contemplated.

In my pre-high school years I don't remember many weekends or holidays that my father didn't work on the property. Although he worked a full shift every day at the factory, doing unpleasant, demeaning work, his focus on developing the property was undeniable. The passion that he exhibited and the energy that he expended in clearing the land and draining the swamps, at the time, probably escaped his young son. Now, 50 years later, as I sat at his bedside, it came back to me, larger-than-life. At the time, I really didn't have anything with which to compare. The superhuman strength and unbelievable diligence with which he tackled the grueling labour was something I observed on a daily basis over many years. I don't remember him ever complaining about anything and I don't remember him ever taking a break.

After the land was cleared and the brush burned, it was time to hand-dig trenches to drain the marsh and swamp. I vividly recall him digging in the trenches, deeper than he was tall, with nothing more than a shovel and a pickaxe. The soil was essentially wet clay which was very

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difficult to dig and shovel because of the heavy weight. We would encounter rocks on occasion that required removal. From time to time a large rock would block our path. It wasn't uncommon to spend several hours in extricating a single rock. I recall the great satisfaction we felt at such a time, having used various "home made" engineering techniques, with planks and logs, to remove a rock from deep underground, that several men wouldn't be able to lift.

Digging the trenches was only the first part of the task. We would then haul in gravel by wheelbarrow, place the clay drainage tiles, cover with tar paper, and add another layer of gravel, before backfilling with the original material we had removed. It was always a challenge to not work too far ahead with the digging. On many occasions we had "cave-ins" caused by rain, underground springs, and sometimes just "bad luck". We learned as we went, and I am sure my father had never done anything like this in the past.

The trenches crisscrossed all over the property, eventually draining into Hopewell Creek, which subsequently drained into the Grand River at Breslau. It was probably this creek running through the property that originally caught my father's attention when considering the purchase. It subsequently became a focal point of the property, at least in the early years. I have fond memories of fishing for "chub" and "shiners", particularly when I was able to bring along my cousin or a friend from the city. As much as I remember the work, my father gave me ample opportunity to explore nature and, in a leisurely way to observe the world around me. I became intimately acquainted with the call of the Red-Winged Blackbird, the scolding of the Cedar Waxwing, and the antics of the Killdeer protecting its young. I look back in anguish as I realize I haven't seen these birds in decades, as they simply do not come close enough to the windows of the clinic.

All these things flooded back into my consciousness as I sat at the bedside. One recollection in particular had a strong impact and this related to the milk truck. Working and perspiring for hours at a time in the hot sun caused overwhelming thirst. The water we brought along was quite quenching, however, nothing like the cold milk from the milk truck. My father knew that this truck travelled along what is now Hopewell Creek Road and turned right at Shantz Station Road on its delivery circuit. Knowing the approximate time of it's passing where we worked, I was sent on a reconnaissance mission, with a few coins, to intercept the truck and purchase a quart of ice-cold milk. At that time, milk came in glass bottles with cardboard caps. I have never tasted anything so good!

I remember the time, probably a year or so after the drainage system was completed, when I first learned of the existence of something called a "backhoe". I was shocked and in awe.

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If my father had been able to afford such a machine, life may have been better, or at least, very different. On the other hand, our “connection with the land” may have been altered and the consequences unknown. In any event, as the drainage system effectively did its job, the land dried up and became usable. The area in and around the present-day cardiac exercise track was particularly wet and swampy. In the early days, hip waders were required to negotiate this area. Now, thousands of cardiac patients have travelled the track without even getting their running shoes wet.

As long back as I can remember, my father had a particular interest in health and in particular “European Health Spa medicine”. I recall, as I started my studies in biochemistry at the University of Waterloo, he was reading a book entitled “Medical Hydrology”. Growing up in a more than 200-year-old German settlement in Yugoslavia, he was familiar with the concept of “cures” offered by health spas. European Health Spas contributed significantly to the healthcare system and even prolonged “cures” were apparently covered by health insurance. Evidence-based clinical findings, even at that time, had shown the promise of physical therapies combined with exercise, diet and nutrition. The book he was reading was a scientific treatise of various types of water therapies. Although he had only a grade six education, it had never seemed out of the ordinary to me, until I sat at his bedside, that his reading materials were rather unusual. I remember, probably in the 60s, that he was doing considerable reading and had a great interest in the “powers of the subconscious mind”. His ongoing motto was “Your Health is Your Wealth”.

It was only now, sitting at his bedside, that it became quite clear to me that he always did have a long-term plan. That plan involved health, fitness, exercise and nutrition, originally modeled after the European Health Spa model, and later dovetailing with the modern day pioneering medical work that I chose. It now seemed so obvious, yet at the same time uncanny, that he would start preparing for the infrastructure of my clinic, 25 years before I would need it. I honestly don't ever remember him attempting to influence my career choice. Maybe it had to do with the “powers of the subconscious mind!”

As I sat with him, watching him struggle, the distress of not being able to help him was overwhelming. I don't recall a single time in my life that he let me down. He was always able to fix anything and everything that needed fixing. As a seasoned medical professional, with an understanding of the certainty of death, it is clear to me that my thinking was irrational. My experience convinced me that at a time like this, irrationality is probably the norm. I suppose the many memories and thoughts that flooded my consciousness were part of my coping mechanism.

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I realized, without question, that I would never be able to verbally discuss this with anyone, let alone my daughters. For some reason, I have developed a sentimentality that seems quite inappropriate, considering my profession and long time in medical practice. I remember early in my medical training becoming tearful when interacting with grieving patients and relatives. At the time I considered this a personality flaw and a weakness that caused me embarrassment. As time went on my sentimental nature failed to harden, even though I had no trouble whatsoever in dealing with medical or surgical emergencies, no matter how gruesome. The only way I would be able to relay this message would be in writing.

I lost count of the number of visits made by the head nurse and the other nursing staff. At approximately 12:30 am the head nurse checked on the status of my father and commented that he was “progressing” quite slowly. She advised that I go home and sleep, and that she would call me at the first sign of deterioration. I declined. Sleep seemed so totally unimportant when I considered what this man had done for me. I recall, as a teenager, suffering an injury requiring hourly medication, day and night. My father came with the medicine every hour during the night, over the course of several months. It didn't matter to him that his factory work required getting up before 5:30 AM. I remember questioning him about how he reset his alarm clock each time. I was surprised when he told me that he didn't use an alarm clock, but rather, he programmed his “subconscious mind.” Initially, I found it hard to believe he could do this. I was awed by the accuracy of his timing. In retrospect, I realize now that his sacrifice was superhuman. There was never even a hint of complaining. I have never known anyone with such resilience.

Various memories and recollections of my childhood reemerged. I remember a very happy and wholesome time, with very little in the way of “material things”. I don't remember ever eating in a restaurant, with the exception of a rare Sunday afternoon hamburger with fries. I don't ever remember staying in a motel or hotel and my first air flight was when I was well into my 20's. The only holidays I remember were “day trips”. I remember a very close but extended family “network,” with family dinners (veritable feasts) and gatherings on all the usual occasions, such as Christmas, New Years and Easter, as well as the celebration of birthdays and “names days” (a European tradition that consisted of celebrating the day of the year associated with one's given name) of all parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. These were the highlights of my childhood and my memories were only good ones.

I remember early on, my father made it very clear that getting an education was not optional. Because he did not have the opportunity to get an education, he did everything possible to make sure my sister and I did. I remember also, in public school, being placed into a class that

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was made up largely of students that had been deemed to have “lesser potential.” Someone had divided the grade 8 students into two classes, more or less according to socio-economic status. Because my parents laboured in a factory, I was placed in a class being groomed for early entry into the workplace. My father was quite upset that the guidance counselors were directing me into high school programs that would not prepare me for university. Without his intervention, who knows how things might have turned out?

As I contemplated my father directing me into my academic education, I recalled also the many life skills he left with me. By example, he taught me how to take chances and how to persevere. He took on projects and tasks that might have seemed impossible and he succeeded. For example, I'm sure he had absolutely no experience in building swimming pools. Yet, he built two, the second, the region's first 25-meter pool. He developed a method of building the pool in sections using a rubberized compound to seal the joints. Clearly an inventor and innovator, out of necessity he found ways of getting the job done, where he and his small family work crew could achieve what otherwise would have required a large construction company. Another example was the first clinic outdoor exercise surface (130' x 100') which doubled as two tennis courts and served the purpose of the early cardiac rehabilitation program (until the present-day exercise track was built). He developed a method of penetrating asphalt emulsion into various grades and layers of gravel.

In the 60's, with the now pleasantly landscaped terrain and the addition of two swimming pools, my father created a unique workplace environment for my sister and me. We supervised and maintained the grounds, taught swimming lessons, and provided a place of leisure and relaxation to many families in the region.

Although it is unlikely that I will ever call upon some of the skills he taught me, there are many that I still use on a regular basis. While it is unlikely that I will ever again personally drain swampland, build a 25-meter swimming pool, or build a tennis court, I still often rely on the carpentry, electrical, plumbing skills, etc. In my state of recollection and contemplation, I realized that the most valuable skills my father taught me were those of perseverance, common sense, and not backing away from a challenge. He showed me that the impossible was not impossible!

While he was very frugal, it was never “about the money.” He strove with great dedication and determination to achieve his goals. Financial gain was not near the top of his list. By example, he taught me the importance of treating others with honour and respect. As I watched his laboured breathing, I remembered a time, in my very young years, when he told me it was

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important to treat others better than you would expect them to treat you. I remembered at the time that this didn't make a lot of sense to me. It made much more sense now.

Many words can be used to describe the character of a man and I have used many of these in describing my father. There might also be some value in understanding the true character of a man by listing those descriptors that do not apply. Words that come to mind would include: ruthless, insensitive, self-centred, and impatient.

I have been deeply touched by the kind words of sympathy and condolences expressed by so many. To see the reflection of my father in the eyes of others, many who did not closely know him, has been most heartwarming:

“Thank you for all you have done for cardiac fitness, Simon Schaman, in keeping the grounds so nice and neat. Your warm greetings will be sadly missed.”

“I am so sorry to hear about your dad. He was always the first person I would see at the clinic back in the “old days”, greeting me with a big smile and a wave as he was looking after the property.”

“Mr. Simon Schaman was a faithful inspiration to the success of the Aerobics Centre and will be sadly missed.”

“I didn't know your Dad. But I know that you thought the world of him, for his help in taking care of the clinic, and also for supporting you and your work. He must have been very proud of you.”

“I never had the privilege to meet your father but his spirit is in the beauty of the trees and flowers and gardens and is felt in the quiet of the grounds – he and your mom must love nature for we all know him through the beauty he cultivated for all of us to enjoy. Blessings and joy in the wonderful memories you share.”

“I know you must have great memories of Simon. He was one of the nicest men I know. He was always kind when the children and I went swimming at your wonderful pool. He always waved, as I went for a walk past your house, when he was working, either in his garden, or mowing the lawn. He will be missed.”

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As the night too rapidly progressed, I became aware of his increased distress and quiet agitation. I was thankful that I had stayed the night. I couldn't live with the idea that he would die alone. At approximately 4 am there was nothing left to do but hold his hand and thank him for all he had done. Almost immediately, a peace seemed to settle over him. His agitated movements calmed and his breathing eased. For the next 30 minutes the peace and tranquility persisted. Then, at 4:30 am his breathing started to slow. For the last time I played for him his favourite song, "The Blue Danube Waltz." As it finished, at 4:39 am he took his second last breath, followed a minute later by his last breath. And then it was over.

If the success of a man is determined by how many people he touched, by how much his actions made the world a better place, my father would be considered a very successful man!

I can never thank him enough!

John Schaman

