
EDITOR'S NOTE

Sometimes serendipity can take your breath away. Occasionally it can even soften the sting of a loss. Dartmouth Medical School suffered a loss with a deep sting indeed, upon the death in late October of Marsh Tenney—a graduate of both the College and the Medical School, a former dean, a longtime department chair, and, most significantly, the “refounder” of Dartmouth Medical School.

DMS would arguably not exist today were it not for the success with which Marsh fulfilled a charge from the Dartmouth Trustees to revitalize a medical school that was, in the mid-1950s, on the brink of closure. And if DMS had closed, it would have been a devastating blow to the clinical organizations—Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital and the Hitchcock Clinic—that are DMS’s partners in Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, for a medical school is an essential component of an academic medical center like DHMC.

So for those familiar with the story of the “refounding,” Marsh has served as a reminder that passion and vision, focus and commitment, can prevail against seemingly insurmountable odds. But the loss runs even deeper than his impact in the past. His impact in the present was powerful and ongoing. The intellectual rigor with which he approached his lifelong research interests was an inspiration to countless colleagues here and elsewhere. His support for other researchers, especially young investigators just getting their start, was legendary. His convictions about the right way to do things made him an institutional polestar (although he’d have been the first to admit that . . . well, some of the people, some of the time, found him prickly).

Marsh was also willing to push the boundaries of the conventional—from admitting women as students more than a decade before Dartmouth College did so, to seeking out ethnic cuisine long before it was chic. He was also widely read and knowledgeable on any number of subjects—which made him an articulate and stimulating conversationalist and an erudite writer.

And then there was his near-flawless memory. I’ll miss him especially on this score. His mind was so acute—his recollection of events that happened 40 or 50 years ago so detailed, so perceptive; the clarity of his thinking so lucid—that he was a walk-

ing history book. If we came across an old photo with no identifications, for example, he could reel off the names of every person pictured and recite each individual’s life history.

But what does all this have to do with serendipity? Well, the day after I got word of Marsh’s death, I was feeling the loss keenly. It was beginning to sink in that never again would I be able to pick his brain about some long-ago event, never again would he drop by my office and offer up a veritable archive of cogent insights. Then the day’s mail arrived. On the very top of the pile was a flyer from another medical school (I’m on lots of colleagues’ mailing lists), promoting that school’s 125th anniversary festivities. The cover of the flyer was emblazoned with a quotation from Sir William Osler, one of medicine’s giants: “The past is always with us, never to be escaped; it alone is enduring; it is good to hark back to the olden days and gratefully to recall the men whose labours in the past have made the present possible.”

As I read Osler’s words, it seemed to me that he was speaking of no one other than Marsh Tenney. I actually felt my breath catch in my throat, so pertinent was Osler’s observation to the thoughts in my mind. And I suddenly felt better, having been reminded that “labours in the past” are more than an artifact of history—that they’re what “have made the present possible.”

Therefore, in one of the features in this issue, we have taken the opportunity to “hark back” to the refounding of Dartmouth Medical School and “gratefully to recall” Marsh Tenney’s seminal role in making possible the thriving organizations of today that are reflected in the pages of this magazine.

There’s just one thing that gives me pause. I’m not altogether certain whether Marsh would be chagrined (or perhaps even annoyed) at being the focus of such a feature—for humility was another of his traits—or whether he’d be pleased to know that the ideals and concepts so central to his life were being highlighted.

But although I valued Marsh’s advice and wisdom immensely, this is a case where—no matter what he felt—we’d have proceeded as we did.

DANA COOK GROSSMAN

DARTMOUTH MEDICINE

EDITOR

Dana Cook Grossman

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Laura Stephenson Carter

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Sandy Adams

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Jonathan Weisberg

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Megan McAndrew Cooper
Sara Fisher
Marta Hristova
John Morton
Roger P. Smith, Ph.D.
James Wright

PHOTOGRAPHERS/ILLUSTRATORS

Mark Austin-Washburn
Suzanne DeJohn
Flying Squirrel Graphics
Jon Gilbert Fox
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EDITORIAL OFFICES

Mailing address: DARTMOUTH MEDICINE, One Medical Center Drive (HB 7070), Lebanon, NH 03756

Delivery address: DARTMOUTH MEDICINE, Two Buck Road (Door with Green Star), Hanover, NH 03755

Phone: 603/650-4039

Fax: 603/650-4085

E-mail: dartmed@dartmouth.edu