

Memorial

Herman A. Iverson (1916-1994)

I knew I had joined the practice of a living legend when a patient asked me once, "Did you have to go to school to do this or did you learn it all from Dr. Iverson?" Occasional patients would think that he was the British or "European," something different and probably aristocratic. At first I called this difference "style," but I came to realize it ran deeper than that.

I recently heard that the night before his first day in office practice, Herman asked a woman who ran a fabric shop in downtown Eureka to patch his coat, which had large holes in both elbows. She did the job in timely fashion and ended up being one of his first patients afflicted with glaucoma. He saw her through the years, sometimes checking her at home when she was unable to come to the office, but he never once charged her for anything, out of gratitude for her help on his first day of practice.

Herman saw medicine as service, never as business. I remember once showing him a very mentally retarded adult patient whose sight we had restored by cataract surgery and being surprised at his unusually joyous exclamation: "Oh how wonderful! How wonderful!" It was the joy of making a difference to the least fortunate and his love for travel that I think led to his famous "mission trips" all over the world for more than 30 years.

The office would then become less hectic, and his lengthy narrations of his experiences would arrive for deciphering, transcription, and distribution to an appreciative group of devotees. There would often be lengthy commentary on history and culture of his locale, sprinkled with humor or philosophy from whatever classic author he was carrying along on the trip. I remember one story about a "refraction" he did standing in the middle of a river in Madagascar. A local person fording in the opposite direction had recognized Herman as the visiting eye specialist and stopped him to complain of reading trouble. Herman took some reading glasses out of his shirt pocket and said, "Here, try these." "They do well," said the gentleman, and each continued on his way.

I was curious to learn Herman's impressions on Albert Schweitzer. He once asked Schweitzer what he thought of the American Peace Corps. After a moment Schweitzer replied, "Well, the intentions are good." Herman also was concerned with intentions more than actions. I never heard him say a judgmental word about any person, but he might ask telling questions about their intentions. Though he readily recognized self-serving action when he saw it, he was not disturbed by it, just indifferent to that kind of outlook.

He had some amazing trips. As I recall, one led to New York, where he heard Leonard Bernstein conduct, then continued by cargo boat to Gdansk, Poland, where Herman visited the man whom he said had invented cataract cryoextraction, then on to Moscow in winter to take the Siberian railway as far as it went. He then flew to Taiwan where he and Ann worked in a mission for 2 months before coming home. He always stayed in the "Y" in New York and said, "There is nothing worse than some fancy hotel where someone is always wanting to carry your bags." He also had little interest in fancy cars—"I feel just the same in a cheap car," he would say. I was surprised when he bought the Thunderbird, his first large car, but I suspect it was to ease the tasks of getting his long legs and sore knees into the vehicle.

Herman enjoyed ophthalmology. I remember in the early years, when we were first learning microsurgery, we would meet at St. Joseph's surgery on a Sunday afternoon. Herman would be carrying a plastic sack containing heads of several recently caught salmon, on whose corneas we would practice our suturing. Herman was the backbone of the Humboldt Eye Society, formed to promote unity and collegiality among community ophthalmologists. We would meet monthly at the Ingomar Club to share our presentations on ophthalmologic topics. After his retirement, Herman brought us his essays on Greek philosophers, Olser, Thoreau, or J. Krishnamurti, his favorite sage, much to the enrichment of the group. He was also instrumental in bringing a number of academic ophthalmologists to our area on visits as house guests, to combine teaching, consultations, salmon fishing with Herman on Free Spirit II, and lively parties (where we were instructed to sit "man, girl, man, girl") at the Iverson home. The parties Herman and Ann gave regularly through the years, where Herman sometimes played ballads on the piano, are a tradition among their friends.

We will all come to terms with the end of Herman's life in our own ways. In discussing tragic events with him at various times, we would have a brief serious talk, then he would say, "Well, life goes on," and that would be the end of it. If I can imagine a conversation with Herman now, under sail in FREE SPIRIT III on a spacious transcendent sea, it might go like this:

"Herman, how was it?"

"Well, it was a wonderful life. There is not much I would do differently."

"You know your friends felt terribly bad about how it ended, Herman."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that, with the police and the publicity and all, but it's very interesting, Dave, that it did rivet my attention on the absolute present, which is all we really have, you know. Well,... Life goes on..."

-D. Davis, MD