

A TRIBUTE TO HARRY AUGUST, M.D.

By: Reuven Bar-Levav, M.D.

The question about the relative importance of nature vis-a-vis nurture will not be resolved in Harry August's lifetime, and probably not in that of most of us, younger than he. Genetic factors are obviously important in determining how many years are given to each of us on the face of this earth, but it is unquestionably also true that the quality of our lives during our years here contributes to longevity most importantly. Harry August, in his 80's, looks, walks and talks like a man half his age. The good Lord must have given him a good constitution that does not wear our easily, but we must also assume that the way he lived his life so far also has had much to do with it.

I first met Harry when he interviewed me for the residency program in psychiatry at Sinai Hospital. He appeared to me like a forbidding old man, although I knew even then that he tried to put me at ease. His questions were penetrating. I remember especially that he wanted to know whether I was a "doer" or a "thinker". He was openly skeptical when I claimed to be both, and his skepticism kept the issue alive and open within me ever since. I assume that in asking me the question, he was also wondering about himself. He surely is both a thinker and a doer. As a thinker he taught me and many others a great deal about the practice of clinical psychiatry. I remember the many hours we spent with each other in his library, in the big house among the trees of Huntington Woods. But he still is "doing it", daily even today, as he was throughout his long career. Many analysts claim that they need to remain unknown to their patients as real entities, and use this as an excuse to remain uninvolved. Not so Harry. He is and was involved

in communal affairs ever since the days when he helped establish the North End Clinic, which eventually gave rise to Sinai Hospital. He always followed faithfully the dictum of the Rabbis of old: "Do not separate yourself from the community." In doing so he, too, became like one of them, a living example to younger men.

I can't actually know how Harry August really is as a man. Even if I knew him much more intimately, I would not have known him well enough for that. My first impression of him as a forbidding old man probably reflected mostly my fears of the situation, more so than it reflected him. I have seen him since also as warm and as welcoming, and as open and genuine. But, the picture of him as a stern, strict man with piercing eyes was probably not altogether a figment of my own imagination. In his dress and in his life he has always kept up high standards, and these were more important than being pleasant and pleasing. But, his door and his heart were usually open when the time and circumstances were right. As the years went by he seems to have mellowed and to have become even wiser than he used to be. His presence among us has been a source of strength and inspiration to me, even when I did not see the world exactly as he did.

In an article a few years ago ^(1.), I described another colleague, a veteran physician, as a "Mensch". The description befits Harry so very well that it bears repetition:

"One of the most honored terms that Jews designate a person with is "Mensch." In Yiddish and German, a Mensch is simply a man, but the term has evolved to mean a whole lot more than that. It denotes a person who truly respects himself and others, one who in an immediate and personal sense knows that Man is created in the image of God, and who would not diminish his humanity by engaging in deceitful or petty practices, nor would he willfully hurt another human being. A Mensch is not a saint, and being human, he is full of errors, shortcomings and imperfections. But he has the courage of his convictions, he is firm yet kind, principled but not rigid."

I know of no one else more suitable to be honored by his colleagues in the Michigan Psychiatric Society. I wish you, Harry, good health and many more years of productive life. These good wishes for you are also self-serving: I, and many others, will benefit by them too.

Thank you for what you have given to me in the past. I hope to have many more opportunities to be with you enjoyably in the future.

REFERENCE

Bar-Levav, R. "The Measure of a Man", DETROIT MEDICAL NEWS, Vol. LXVII, No. 39, October 18, 1976, pp. 6 & 7.