The Anatomy Professor

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Johanna Hagedoorn walked into Temple Beth El in Bradenton, Florida in 2001. Though she wasn't Jewish, she cradled an object she wanted to return to the Jewish people. She shared her story with the rabbi: almost 60 years earlier, her neighbors in Holland—the Cohen family—were deported. Knowing the Hagedoorns were not Jewish, the Cohens had asked them to care for their cherished family menorah until they returned to claim it. No one from the Cohen family ever returned. During the war, the menorah was hidden in the Hagedoorn family home. When her mother was dying, she passed it to Johanna, along with its story. She brought it with her when she emigrated to the US, and for decades it held pride of place on her mantel. Now, aware that she was in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, she decided to return the menorah to the Jewish community.

Perhaps it is more than coincidence that the object in question was a menorah, the quintessential symbol of the Jewish people and the ritual object used in the celebration of Hanukkah—which means “dedication.” Johanna Hagedoorn was the epitome of dedication, fulfilling as best she could a 60-year-old promise made by her parents. The Hebrew words for “dedication” (“hanukkah”) and “education” (“hinuch”) share the same root. She embodied both, for to me this dedicated woman was Professor Hagedoorn, my teacher.

As director of our first-year anatomy course, Professor Hagedoorn was our introduction to medical education. We initially thought of her only as an elderly anatomy professor with a singular focus on her subject and very little sense of humor. She was a private person, though never aloof or haughty. We sensed, though, that there was more to her than her apparent persona.

Her method of teaching went far beyond the rote memorization often associated with anatomy to inculcate a deeper understanding of the subject and its relationship to other disciplines in medicine. She would brook nothing less than excellence, yet her exacting nature was never threatening. She was committed to helping all her students achieve a profound level of understanding, frequently coordinating extra sessions for those who needed them.

Watching her stand over a cadaver and effortlessly outline complex structures was daunting. Our group's cadaver had metastatic lung cancer. When I voiced my frustration at the difficulty of the dissection, Professor Hagedoorn gently reminded me that this was, after all, the rationale for learning anatomy, and that this would be our constant struggle as physicians.

I once spent an entire day dissecting an area no larger than my palm. For the first time, anatomy became more than just structures to memorize. My sense of accomplishment was palpable because Professor Hagedoorn was teaching more than anatomy. She wanted us to truly understand the commitment

required to be a physician. Yet for all of her rigor and insistence on excellence, she did not teach without a sense of humanity. Instead of fearing her, she made us want to do better, and when we had exceeded what even we ourselves believed possible, we could earn one of her rare, subtle smiles. Her willingness to offer encouragement and guidance to struggling medical students led to occasions when she dined with me and my roommates. In fact, she even attended my wedding. When she retired from New York Medical College, a scholarship was established in her name—a tribute given to only a few cherished mentors.

We all knew that Professor Hagedoorn was a native of the Netherlands. I think I had been told that prior to World War II she had been a medical student. Despite a relationship that was deeper than what many of us had with most faculty, on reading her obituary I was surprised to learn that she had led a life of cinematic proportions, and that her legacy was so much greater than the generations of physicians who began their education under her tutelage. As her student, I never knew that a younger Johanna Hagedoorn was a “righteous Gentile,” a non-Jew who risked her own life during the Holocaust to save Jewish lives.

Professor Hagedoorn's family had happily participated in the seafaring tradition of her native Netherlands. After the German invasion, at the age of 19, Johanna Hagedoorn resigned from medical school and joined the resistance. Blackening the sails of the family's boat to avoid detection, alone and at night, she ferried hundreds of Jewish children to British ships in the English Channel, avoiding not only the German patrols but also mines. Capture would have meant likely torture and certain death at the hands of the Gestapo.

The Talmud tells us that for “one who saves a single life, it is as though they had saved the world entire.” Had Johanna Hagedoorn's life ended with her work with the resistance, her dedication to saving lives during World War II would have been enough to secure her legacy. However, her years as a dedicated teacher stand as a second, equally important gift.

I think back to the times when, standing next to our cadaver, Professor Hagedoorn would speak in almost mystical terms about the importance of what we were learning. Towards the end of our first year, when we finally opened the skull, she held up the brain and said something like “Behold, the soul of humanity.” I and many of my fellow students probably rolled our eyes. Anatomy had been something to memorize, get through and move on from to “important” subjects. Now, knowing the richness of her story, I understand her a bit better. Living in a time when evil ruled and many stood aside silently gave her a unique perspective on medicine and on life that she hoped to impart to us.

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After relinquishing and risking so much, it would have been easy for her to be bitter, to lament her fate. Instead, she used her perspective to transform our lives, enabling us to become compassionate and dedicated medical students—and later, physicians.

I cannot recall a single instance where she said anything about her life as a righteous Gentile. My first thought on learning of her work in the resistance was wishing that I had known of her contributions while she was alive. As my own family was diminished by the Holocaust, I would have wanted to thank her. But for Professor Hagedoorn, it was never about her own accomplishments, and always about the subject at hand. Perhaps she thought that her own story would detract from the knowledge she was trying to convey to us. If so, this was a supremely unselfish act in a life of unselfish acts. Yet in retrospect, how she taught was so obviously informed by those lives she saved, and those she could not save. The urgency and importance, the dedication that she attached to teaching, which many of us found sometimes amusing and often frustrating, surely had its roots in those dark times. Just as her actions during the occupation had life-and-death consequences, so would our failure to master anatomy. It would have been inconceivable and unacceptable to her that any of us, privileged medical students, could possibly do less than our best.

An overarching theme of the Holocaust is to dedicate ourselves to ensuring that those who perished are never forgotten. When Professor Hagedoorn died in 2009, she had no living relatives. The funeral home in charge of her burial indicated that there would be no service and that she would be cremated.

Johanna Hagedoorn had without hesitation or recompense saved countless lives. Members of the synagogue, who had come to know her over an 8-year period since she brought in the menorah and shared her story, donated a burial plot in a Jewish section of the cemetery and held a memorial service to honor her life and work. Lauding her memory, a synagogue officer said: "...it's fitting that she will be among the people she helped and rescued. There are an

untold number of Jewish children who are alive and have families because of her."

In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Elie Wiesel spoke of a young Jewish boy who was being deported. Out of the memory of this boy arose this question to Wiesel and to each of us: "What have you done with my future? What have you done with your life?"¹

The epitaph on Christopher Wren's tomb in St. Paul's Cathedral says "Lector, si monumentum requirus, circumspice," or "Reader, if you seek his memorial, look around you."² Look at what Johanna Hagedoorn did with her life, and with our future. Because of the dedication of one woman who risked death in the 1940s, there are hundreds if not thousands of people alive today. Because generations of physicians were the object of her dedication as a passionate and compassionate teacher, they are better doctors, and more importantly, better human beings.

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