

Obituary

In Memoriam – Dr Faisal Masud (1954-2019)

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*What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.*

TS Eliot

There is a story told about Allama Muhammad Iqbal: when he was offered a knighthood by Her Majesty's government, he insisted that he would only accept if his beloved teacher Maulvi Mir Hassan was awarded the title of 'Shamsul Ulema' (the 'Sun of Scholars'). When the government objected that Mir Hassan had not written a book (or books) worthy of that title, Iqbal famously replied 'I am his book'. It is said that Faiz Ahmed Faiz would answer the same way if people ever disparaged his teacher and mentor Ahmad Shah Bokhari 'Patras', teacher, diplomat, educationist and humorist.

Prof. Dr. Faisal Masud, who died almost a year ago, was just 65, young by today's standards and apparently in good health; which is why for most of us, especially those who had worked closely with him, his death was a shock.

I first got to know Faisal sahib well when he served as the first permanent Vice Chancellor of our alma mater, King Edward Medical University. It was at the same place 30 years ago that I first made Faisal sahib's acquaintance as a medical student. The medical college which I joined in December 1985, King Edward Medical College (now King Edward Medical University) was an

intimidating place. In addition to its distinguished 125 year history (I was admitted to KEMC just as the 125 year anniversary celebrations of the college were winding down) and its traditions of having trained every generation of physicians since the founding of Pakistan, KEMC also attracted the best and brightest students from all over Pakistan, all of them hyper-competitive and ruthless in their desire to excel. The first two years in KEMC were excruciating. We were subjected to lecture after lecture, class after class; in most of which we sat clueless and bored. This was followed by test after test after test, one after another until we were exhausted and came home tired and scared. I vividly remember my initial experiences of carving up dead bodies in the Anatomy 'dissection hall' which reeked of formalin and exuded a menacing air with human corpses laying on dissection tables covered by sheets. The first few weeks of medical college, I would wake up startled at night, certain that the people who we had been 'dissecting' had come into my room at night and were standing around me. This went on for two years and finally, after passing our 'first professional' exams, we got to the third year of medical college where the general atmosphere in classes was more relaxed and

we finally got to go to the hospital where we felt like 'real' doctors.

It was also in third year that we got to see Dr. Faisal Masud in action. Generally, classes of medical students are taken by senior faculty, usually a professor. If the professor is not available, then the next most senior person is assigned to take the class. Dr. Faisal Masud made an immediate impression on all of us (not an easy thing to accomplish with 200+ potentially rowdy medical students). To this day I can still picture him in my mind: unruly salt and pepper hair which often fell like a mop over his forehead, piercing eyes darting around from behind horn-rimmed glasses, impeccably dressed in elegant suits (in the winter) and safari suits or a shirt and tie in the summer, holding a mike in one hand with the thick black wire trailing behind him, a chalk in the other hand with which he would write or draw a figure on the board and a complete, encyclopedic mastery of his subject. He was a mesmerizing figure. Even back then, when he walked into the class room, an immediate hush fell on the room. He had (we knew) come back after completing his post graduate medical training in England. That alone, like many of his peers made him stand out. We could tell, even as relatively novice medical students, that those of our teachers who had studied abroad had a far more comprehensive grasp of their subject than those who had not. In addition, they appeared more polished, more humane, more inspiring and just more fun; or at least that's how it appeared to me.

And Faisal sahib (the moniker we all adopted for him) was in a class of his own. He would hold forth on the topic at hand, prowling the front of the class room, speaking into the mike with the wire trailing behind him. Occasionally he would saunter over to the blackboard and write some notes or make a

figure on the board and then go back to speaking, his fierce gaze darting around the lecture hall.

He had arrived back from the UK just a few years ago, armed with an advanced medical degree (and, it was whispered in class, an English wife!) and a passion to teach. With his immaculately tailored suits, piercing eyes and unruly salt and pepper hair, he made for an arresting figure and one that we, the male medical students, desperately wanted to emulate. In class, holding a piece of chalk in one hand and an old style mike in the other he would hold our class of two hundred mesmerized for 45 minutes. Unlike most of our other faculty members, when Faisal sahib spoke, you could not take your eyes off him. His lectures were like theater performances (I learned much later that he had actually taken acting classes at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts when he was in England). When he talked, there was pin drop silence. His complete mastery of what he was teaching, the way he delivered his lectures, his demeanor, his clothes, his body language, all said 'I know what I am talking about and you better listen if you know what's good for you'. And we loved and feared him in equal measure. So much so that graduating medical students fought over the privilege to work with him in the hospital in their 'house job'.

I did my house job with him in North Medical Ward where he was Associate Professor and since we rarely saw our Professor, for all practical purposes, Faisal sahib was in charge. Despite my disinterest in the subject of medicine (or Internal Medicine as it is now called), I must have made some kind of impression on Faisal sahib during my house job because I remember him asking me as our medicine rotation ended what I planned to do in my career. I learned later that this was

Faisal sahib's way of acknowledging someone's intellectual brightness. He only inquired in this way about someone in whom he saw some potential. I responded that I wanted to study psychiatry in America upon which he immediately wrinkled his nose in distaste "People who go to America are all about money; that's all they think about". He then proceeded to tell me that I should go to England and study medicine, his chosen subject.

I know now, after having worked with him as a colleague and medical teacher that this was the highest compliment that Faisal sahib could offer: inviting someone to follow in his footsteps. But I was determined to go to America to do my Residency and become a psychiatrist. I lost touch with Faisal sahib for over fifteen years while I was in America except for a brief meeting in 2006 arranged by a friend when I was visiting Lahore to see what opportunities were available should I choose to return.

In 2010, after almost sixteen years in America, I moved back to Lahore with my young family and joined the teaching faculty of KEMU; an honor that I never thought I would achieve.

In 2013, my annual contract at KEMU was ending and I was apprehensive that I would have to leave my teaching position and look for something else. By January, we had started hearing murmurs that Faisal sahib might be our new Vice-Chancellor. I was both slightly apprehensive as well as a little excited that I might get to meet him again but was not sure when or how I would approach him since, if he did come to KE, I would now be a part of his faculty rather than a student. As the end of my annual contract grew nearer, I got more and more anxious and finally worked up the

courage to go meet Faisal sahib in the Vice-Chancellor's office. As I walked up to the door, the doorman automatically opened it since he knew me (I had been at KEMU for almost three years). I hesitated as I walked in and paused at the door. Faisal sahib was at the desk at the far end in the large room, engrossed in some papers. The first thing I noticed was the shock of white hair, still thick and full but now almost snow white. It felt odd, as if time had sped up and I had been transported into the future. In Faisal sahib's presence, we all felt like medical students again. With some trepidation, I walked up to the desk and sat down in one of the chairs in front of his desk. He looked up and fixed me with his piercing gaze.

"Yes?" Faisal sahib said to me curtly. I did not expect him to remember me from our brief interactions in the past and I certainly did not expect that he would remember me from having done a house job with him over 20 years ago. Having been a teacher now at KEMU for almost 10 years, I know that only the brightest and most motivated students stick in a teacher's mind since they are a testament to our work and a source of perpetual pride for us. I had always been a middle of the road student and other than my large stature, was not very noticeable.

I haltingly explained my situation to Faisal sahib trying to make it as short as possible. He listened intently for a couple of minutes then said brusquely "Tum ne Professor lagna hai?" ("Do you want to be Professor"?). I was serving as Assistant Professor at the time and knew that I did not have enough research publications according to HEC's very stringent criteria to qualify as Professor. So I responded that I wanted to be promoted to Associate Professor. 'Seat hai tumharay department main?' ('Is there a vacancy in your

department?') Faisal sahib asked. I told him that the seat of Associate Professor in KEMU's Psychiatry Department had been vacant since I had joined there in 2010 and for several years before. Faisal sahib swiveled in his chair and fixed his admin officer with a glare "Sir, banda aap k paas hai, seat khali hai, aap lagatay kyun nahi hain?" ("You have a qualified candidate and a vacancy, why won't you appoint him?").

That was Faisal sahib; possessed with a singular ability to cut through KE's maddening red-tape and bureaucracy. And that was the beginning of our new association. He was my teacher again but this time, I was a teacher too and the lessons I learned from him in those four years he served as our Vice-Chancellor are some of the most valuable lessons I have ever learned in my life.

Once I happened to walk by a lecture hall and paused outside. Faisal sahib was inside taking a lecture. Despite being a Vice-Chancellor, he had not given up teaching. Every few minutes I would hear the class erupt in laughter as he regaled them with his stories. I asked him one day if I could sit in the class and he graciously agreed. With over three hundred senior medical students hanging on to his every word, I sat in the front row and once again watched Faisal sahib work his magic; gesticulating, talking, whispering, joking, laughing along with the students and by the end of the class, he was drenched in sweat, so complete was the effort he put into his teaching. The students were in awe of him and so was I.

When he came to our University as Vice-Chancellor, he took a liking to me and singled me out for his special attention. Faisal sahib's attention was a double edged sword though. It meant taking on onerous tasks that I was

singularly ill-suited for: going to a local market and picking out the lights that he wanted to install in our grand University Senate Hall or using my family connections to contact eminent local architects and trying to persuade them to renovate our Senate Hall for free. I even once ended up sorting through roof tiles to weed out the ones that Faisal sahib decided were low quality (my colleagues still tease me about that).

In exchange for this drudgery though, those he liked were rewarded with teas and coffees with him in his grand Vice-Chancellor's office where we would be regaled with stories about his exploits in England, his singular dislike for lectures while he was a medical student (even though he ended up the best graduate of his college) and even recipes for making the best pineapple up down cake that he personally had taught his chef.

In addition, his tenure as VC of our University was a breath of fresh air compared to the stultifying atmosphere before it. The renovated Senate Hall was decorated with reproductions of paintings by famous masters from Michelangelo to Van Gogh to Monet; Iqbal Bano's rendition of Faiz's 'Tum Aaye Ho' would play in the background at official functions and once Faisal sahib insisted that I sit in his office and listen with him to a rendition of Amir Khusro's "Har baat hai rindana" while his office staff looked on bemused.

Another time I had gone to his office for some errand and was waiting my turn to speak to him while he conferred with senior professors. Suddenly, he looked up, pointed at me and held up a book on his desk "Oye, suna hai tum bahut kitabain waghaira parhtay ho? Yeh kitaab parhi hai?". He was holding up a copy of "Baital Pachisi", the famous Sanskrit

collection of tales about a vetala (or Baital), a celestial spirit analogous to a vampire in Western literature who hangs upside-down from a tree and inhabits and animates dead bodies. He paused his meeting and called me over. I took the book, turned its pages and told him I would like to read it. He looked at me and said with a twinkle in his eye “Yeh bahut mushkil kitaab hai. Tum parh lo gay?”. Then he smiled and said 'If you can read it, I will gift it to you. Sit.'

So I pulled up a chair next to his desk and sat down. I opened up the first page and started reading. The Urdu was slightly difficult with some Sanskrit words mixed in but after the first paragraph I began to get the hang of it. Every so often Faisal sahib would stop me to ask the meaning of a particular word and I would tell him. I had read about two pages to him when he stopped me, beaming. He looked over at his other Professors triumphantly and handed me the book 'Shabaash!' I asked him to sign it for me and he did in his elegant long hand. That book is one of my greatest treasures. There are too many stories like that for a short article but suffice it to say that Faisal sahib was, in the best sense, a true legend. He was Pakistan's William Harvey, Edward Jenner and Alexander Fleming all rolled into one.

Before leading our university, he had established, built and led another public medical college in Lahore, the Services Institute of Medical Sciences and had also, within its premises built Lahore's first public diabetic treatment center with a first of its kind electronic medical record for patient registration. The number of doctors he trained is countless, easily in the tens of thousands and the number of patients he personally treated is even larger. Even on the day of his

death, he had spent the morning in his office at Punjab HOTA, the Human Organ Transplant Authority that the government had established at his urging to regulate Pakistan's mushrooming illegal organ trade. Faisal sahib was appointed PHOTA's first Director General.

He could be irascible, rude and even aggressive but he was also unbelievably kind, giving and affectionate. When I first got to know him, I too felt the lash of his tongue but when we got to be friends, he was nothing but affectionate and always inspiring. My colleagues and I, all of us in our fifties, senior medical teachers all, agreed that we never sat in the company of Faisal sahib without learning something new and being inspired. He once joked to me that he had no ear for poetry (although he had a keen appreciation for art) but also mentioned that he wrote short stories although he never published any and none of us was allowed to read them.

Faisal sahib is not among us today but teachers like him never die. As long as there are people like us who remember him with fondness and affection, he is alive. Shakespeare said “The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.” In Faisal sahib's case, the opposite is true. He was not perfect; far from it. But when we remember him, it is always with reverence and affection. For me at least, he is still teaching us from beyond the grave. When I am faced with an ethical or clinical dilemma, I often ask myself 'What would Faisal sahib do?' And in most cases, the answer is the correct one.

Farewell Sir, we are all your 'books' and we will continue teaching to others what you taught us, until we meet you again.