

W. EDWARDS DEMING—*PROPHET OF QUALITY*

October 14, 1900 – December 20, 1993

December 20 marks the tenth anniversary of the death of W. Edwards Deming—a great benefactor to American business—mentor to many—a scholar—and a great man.

He is missed and will long be remembered. In honor of this anniversary, we are pleased to offer this special article. Author Lisa McNary was Dr. Deming's last graduate student and this essay is excerpted from the book, *Deming: The Way We Knew Him*, edited by Frank Voehl and published by St. Lucie Press, Copyright © 1995. For more information go, to <http://www.crcpress.com>. The article is used by permission of the author and publisher.

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ON QUALITY MANAGEMENT, DR. DEMING, AND CANDLES THE LAST GRADUATE STUDENT REMEMBERS HER MENTOR

By Lisa D. McNary

“It’s rather pleasant the way the human mind slips backwards and forwards through the years. Looking back through the years can be rather like walking down a corridor holding a candle. Incidents and places completely forgotten appear out of the blackness and, one by one, are lit as you pass.”

Jean Hersey
The Shape of a Year
(Charles Scribner & Sons, 1967)

At Dr. Deming's passing, I looked over the internship journal that I kept as a requirement for a Management course while working on my doctorate. In that internship, I spent several weeks with Dr. Deming, working with him in Washington and at both NYU and Columbia Universities. In a few short months, the words he spoke to me in reply to my inquiry regarding his sponsoring my internship were true: “Spend some time with me. You’ll learn more than if you did an internship in a company.” I did indeed. I learned a lot about quality management; I learned a lot about Dr. Deming; I learned a lot about life. I only wish there had been more time than the three semesters that I spent with him to learn more. I have the dubious distinction of being Dr. Deming's last graduate student. In many ways, the candle that lights the memories of the past is the same candle that must be carried into the future so Dr. Deming's work continues.

My relationship with Dr. Deming began in the winter of 1992. I was nearing the dreaded ABD (All But Dissertation) stage of my doctoral coursework—that dubious point where some graduate students begin their research only to get mired in the process for years. During that semester, I took a research methods class that allowed me to pursue dissertation ideas; it was a conscious attempt to keep me on track to graduation. Several ideas had popped up during my varied coursework, but none had really grabbed me as “the one topic.” Then, information regarding Dr. Deming’s “System of Profound Knowledge,” which was unpublished at the time, was passed on to me by Howard Gitlow at the University of Miami. We bounced some ideas around, and I wrote Dr. Deming, requesting a meeting to discuss the topic with him—only half expecting that he would have the time or inclination. Within days, I was excited to receive a reply with a confirmed meeting date set for Thursday, March 19, 1992 at his home in Washington, DC.

I thought that I came prepared with a tape recorder, my notes on Quality Management that I had studied since 1986, structured questions, and the first draft of a profile inventory based on the “System of Profound Knowledge” that would identify Deming and non-Deming managers, which was the focus of my research. Dr. Deming patiently answered my questions and advised me on some areas of additional study. Though there was much work yet to be done, I felt confident that the profile development was feasible.

Then, just before we left for dinner at the Cosmos Club, Dr. Deming took all my materials away from me, inquiring, “Now, why are you really doing this? What’s your aim?” This is the point where I realized my outward preparedness of tape recorder, notes, and questions did not equal total preparedness. I recall that I needed my notes desperately, since they contained my rationale for undertaking the topic of the “System of Profound Knowledge,” which was still very new to me. I struggled with his questions until he was reasonably satisfied that I was marginally competent to embark on this project. The repeated phrase, “I need to study further,” sufficed for now, but I knew that the time would come when Dr. Deming would expect me to have studied. I vowed to follow through.

We trekked to the Cosmos Club in the blue Maverick during which I had just enough time to realize that completing this project properly would be impossible without Dr. Deming’s assistance. Dinner seemed extremely short while I pondered how to venture the topic of asking one of the busiest men in America to consider working with me on my dissertation. Over dessert, I asked Dr. Deming if he felt the project had merit to which he replied, “You have much to study.” Continuing, I inquired, “If I study and work on the profile extensively, would you be a member of my dissertation committee?” He tilted his head toward his right shoulder slightly, smiled broadly, and spoke one word that was magic to my ears, “Certainly.” Thus, began a series of trips for me from the University of New Mexico to the east coast to meet with Dr. Deming as I finished my graduate work.

We arranged our next meeting for August 16 and 17. It seemed like a long time, but it really wasn’t. Before our meeting, my first hurdle was to pass my doctoral comprehensive exams that were scheduled in mid-July, giving me only one full month to write my dissertation proposal on which I wanted to have Dr. Deming’s approval before I handed it in to my department and the rest of my committee. It was during this August meeting that I realized that Dr. Deming had a far different teaching style than any professor that I ever had. He commented throughout his reading that the information in this draft was markedly improved, and I would beam inside at those words. Then, he intermittently sharpened his pencil every few pages to make notes and grammatical corrections, and I became dismayed. I vividly recall thinking, “How can it be good if he’s sharpening his pencil so much?” When he handed the paper back to me, many sentences and paragraphs were completely

scratched through and the word, “No” written next to them or a comment, “Pronoun without an antecedent” would be in the margin. Dr. Deming’s style was very Aristotelian in nature in that he never specifically told me what to do, only that certain areas needed more “study.” It was up to me to find my own way, to formulate questions to ask him for direction, and then to study the materials once again. At first, this style greatly frustrated me. Previous professors had always given very directive suggestions such as citing particular sources, including additional topics, or correcting my style with their own phraseology. Thus, all that was required was to incorporate those suggestions.

Dr. Deming’s method required a great deal of time and effort and thus, was not the most efficient way for a time-deprived graduate student. But in the end, his method was the most effective way for me truly to learn the topic, for it forced me to read and reread, think and rethink, write and rewrite. My dissertation research became an applied version of the PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) Cycle!

But it wasn’t all hard work. Dr. Deming’s ideology was also that hard work deserved a bit of respite, whether it be a good meal, a classic piece of music, or a drink of gin and slice of cheese before bed. We had pre-arranged times that we would stop our work for the day. Usually it was late, but I welcomed the time to linger at the end of the day, for this is when I learned the most about Dr. Deming as a person. Perhaps my hailing from the West stirred memories of his boyhood days in Wyoming from which he would share anecdotes. For example, when Dr. Deming met my friendly Russian Blue feline, Master Barne Taggart Esquire, he recounted his memories of a cat that he had had a boy that kept his brother and him warm during the long, cold winter months.

In fact, these personal moments contrasted greatly from many of Dr. Deming’s public moments where he would rail against unprepared reporters, errant CEOs, and those seminar participants who attempted to challenge the quality management principles. Many people asked me if he was as obstinate and rude to me as he was in those notorious railings, especially after the “American Interests” segment in the fall of 1992 was aired on PBS. “Never,” was always my emphatic reply, and I recalled these questions and Dr. Deming’s public persona as his large frame bent over to reach out to pet the entranced feline, cooing softly, “Come here, kitty-kitty.” Those two were instant friends, and Dr. Deming’s first words to me the next morning were, “The kitty slept with me all night long.” He smiled broadly as he stroked Master Barne Taggart Esquire who was perched contentedly on his lap. After the cat did a series of sit, sit-up, and jump tricks for Dr. Deming, he proclaimed him “a quality cat,” a badge of honor for the once stray feline.

Another memorable feature of Dr. Deming was his humor and wit. Anyone who ever attended one of his seminars had to wonder if he ever harbored a desire to be a stand-up comic. Humor came so naturally for him, and it held the attention of his audiences. When Dr. Deming gave a public lecture sponsored by the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque after my dissertation defense, I counted no less than two dozen times that he had the near capacity crowd at the convention center in stitches in a two hour period. To one question from the audience asking, “What advice do you give a 24 year-old graduate MBA student beginning to take on the business world?” Dr. Deming replied without hesitating, “Well, it’s a little late to give him advice. He’s already been to school...A little late. Yep. Another one [question]?”

His style cast a spell, an interesting mix of his quality management theory, pertinent anecdotes, and humor. I remember being amazed that from the stage that I could hear papers shuffling in the back row as one participant intermittently took notes in a frenetic manner. Nearly two thousand people sat spell bound, and Dr. Deming later commented what a good audience they were. He humbly took the compliment that it was he who held the audience. This is not to say that his style was easy. In fact,

several people commented that listening to Dr. Deming took a lot of work and concentration; however, many people also noted that they got much out of his lecture.

Many times, Dr. Deming's humor and wit were funny ways of being serious. I recall us setting a date for my doctoral defense while at a seminar in St. Louis in October of 1992. We matched-merged our open dates, and he seized April 1: "April Fool's Day. Now that does seem to be a perfect date for a doctoral defense, doesn't it?" Even as an academic for many years, Dr. Deming realized that many of the procedures and motions that students had to go through were frustrating at best and meaningless at worst. But, he also knew that they were "systems" problems over which the student had no control, and thus, he cooperated to get the student through the maze. Another example of using humor to make a serious point also comes from the public lecture in Albuquerque. In making a point about the destructive effects of competition on business and the consumer, he commented:

I'd like to understand this audience a little better. I wonder how many people here have ridden in an airplane from one city to another during the past 3 months, 6 months? Hands up. [He scans the audience.] Mmmm. Everybody. That's what you get for competition. Could it be worse? Wait a month! It will be worse!

If that airplane comes in late, the flight attendant thanks the people, thanks the passengers for their cooperation. Well, what else can prisoners do? Prisoners are pretty cooperative. Open-ended competition—as the result of which you have no choice. Northwest Airlines is the only one from Washington to Detroit. And when it arrives, when the airplane arrives in Washington or Detroit, the flight attendant thanks the people, thanks the passengers for choosing Northwest Airlines. How the hell else did they think they'd get there?

They don't have a choice!

I learned a lot working with Dr. Deming, but I also remember laughing a lot. That combination of continuing to learn and laughing must have been one of Dr. Deming's secrets to a long life. If I had a dollar for every time I was asked, "How did you manage to get Dr. Deming on your dissertation committee?"—all my graduate work would have been fully financed. But, no one ever believed my pedestrian answer, "I just asked him." Everyone expected a long, drawn out amazing story. That Dr. Deming, so famous a person, would respond to an ordinary request from an anonymous graduate student just boggled their minds. At first, it boggled my mind too. I knew that I was extremely fortunate to learn from and be associated with Dr. Deming. But it was his ordinary acts that made him so extraordinary as an individual to me. Through all of his fame, he somehow managed to maintain a center, a balance to his life; something that I imagine could be very difficult. For me, Dr. Deming is the only person in my life who I can characterize as being a gentleman and a scholar. Many people attempt this admirable goal, but only manage to approximate it.

Now, I am at the end point of my personal contact with Dr. Deming, but I will always have contact with his work. During my doctoral work, I managed to incorporate the study of quality management into many classes including History, American Studies, and Organizational Behavior. Looking at the topic from a variety of lenses has given me the opportunity to turn the topic inside out and finally begin to understand its applications to work specifically and life in general. I realize that I still have much to learn. Though our lives intersected only for a short time, Dr. Deming touched my life so profoundly that it is difficult to articulate. At times, I find myself returning to this series of quotes of Dr. Deming's that I recorded during my first four-day seminar on "Quality, Productivity, and Competitive Position"

held in Newport Beach, California on February 24-28, 1986, a seminar during which I was the Recorder of Red Beads for his now famous Red Bead Experiment:

Continual improvement allows people pride with increased productivity. But remember there is NO instant pudding. It is a long journey. Don't tell me ten ways I can't do something; tell me one way I can! It's so easy to do nothing! It's a challenge to do something. Learning is not compulsory; it's voluntary. Improvement is not compulsory; it's voluntary. But to survive, we must learn. The penalty for ignorance is that you get beat up. There is no substitute for knowledge. Yet, time is of the essence.

These words certainly haunted me for years and in many ways, created the matrix around which many activities in my life have been shaped. Now, the words will continue to haunt me as Dr. Deming's last graduate student, but it also my responsibility that I make those words haunt others such as my students, colleagues, and clients as well. Dr. Deming is now in that "other," more perfect world. Yet, while in this world, he did much to make organizational America, educational systems, and governmental institutions better. That candle mentioned in the opening quote of this essay not only lights the corridor of past memories but also shines down an long corridor of opportunity for all of us who knew Dr. Deming and heard his words to continue his paradigmatic, landmark work. We must continue to "find the way."

You have heard the words; you must find the way.

It will never be perfect.

Perfection is not for this world; it is for some other world.

I hope what you have heard here today will haunt you the rest of your life.

I have done my best.

W. Edwards Deming
Deming Management Seminar
Newport Beach, CA
February 24 to 28, 1986
