Impossible Dreams

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Dr. Peter Safar passed from this world on 03 August 2003. Each of us who had the opportunity to be touched by this most extraordinary human being has lost a friend who continues to serve as a role model for us. Dr. Safar has been a mentor for me as well as for hundreds of physicians, nurses, and other health professionals whose lives have been impacted by his presence.

Dr. Safar was a man with many dreams—dreams that stemmed from his cares, concerns, musings, and beliefs. Most remarkably, he also was an expert in realizing so many of his dreams. We all know that he proved that life could be sustained using mouth-to-mouth ventilation. He conceived the sequence still used for the performance of cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and thus, played a major role in saving tens of thousands of human lives. He originated the concept and the term "brain resuscitation". He knew that many deaths and much of the pain and suffering in the world are unnecessary; too many deaths occur in people with "brains too young to die".

These were but a few of his well-known and recognized scientific accomplishments. However, I do not intend merely to praise Dr. Safar and his many scientific accomplishments, but rather, I will attempt to cull from his life some important lessons that may be valuable to each of us in both our private and professional lives. I want to concentrate on some of Peter's accomplishments beyond the realm of science—the humanitarian components of his contributions.

Peter believed that there were no boundaries to medicine—geographically, politically, or individually. He envisioned a larger role for medicine that could bridge diverse cultures and philosophies, cross borders, and unite countries far distant from each other. He was able to bridge the Iron Curtain by building a relationship with Dr. Negovsky in Moscow—a relationship built around their respective work in brain resuscitation. This linkage was unique and defied many taboos of that time. But, it was this relationship that also facilitated the collaboration between the Soviet Union and the United States that, following the 1988 earthquake in Armenia, led to the groundbreaking application of qualitative research methods to the study of the medical aspects of disasters, and now, provides the scientific base upon which disaster medicine rests. Thus, he revolutionized disaster research with the introduction of qualitative data collection techniques previously not recognized by our medical colleagues as "real" science.

Peter was an outspoken advocate for bridge-building, and somehow, he almost always was able to find the resources to build them, even when no resources seemed available. Peter worked endlessly to build these bridges because he believed they were right—right for humanity. He was an insatiable believer in and defender of what was "right" for humanity. His was the strongest voice in the medical world for the protection of human rights.

But even a strong voice can be amplified, and wisely, he recognized our ability to accomplish more together than alone; this applied not only to individuals, but also to politics at the local, national, and international levels. When the two nuclear powers threatened the world with catastrophe, he formed the International Physicians for the Prevention of the Use of Nuclear Weapons. He boldly envisioned and espoused the delivery of health care as a continuum from system entry to hospital discharge and beyond. He was a co-founder of both the World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine (WADEM) and the Society for Critical Care Medicine (SCCM)—two professional organizations that share his vision of the continuum of medical care—reinforcing our need to work together to accomplish our dreams. He was the founder and first Editor of this medical journal (*Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*). He knew that the science of disaster medicine could not advance or become what it is without the ability to share this knowledge. If you have the opportunity, examine Volume 1 of this journal and you will find it was typewritten and duplicated!

It was Peter's dreams that made up his extraordinary *vision*—his ability to see the world not as it is, but as it should be. It is through his extraordinary vision that he taught us how to lead. He knew that in order to realize a vision, it is necessary to convince others to buy into the

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vision, and lead them along the way until it became a "done deal". But, he also knew that the road to achieving any vision is neither smooth nor easy. There usually are many bumps in the road and barriers that are erected, particularly when you walk onto what others believe is their "turf". People struggle to maintain their respective power bases and to do so means they must exert control. They fear loss of control, no matter how seemingly insignificant. And, most people resist change; change is threatening. But, change is essential to progress.

Peter had ways of surmounting these barriers and of getting his dreams to become reality. He operated with a set of 22 unique "Laws for the Navigation of Life" (Table 1). Of these, I believe the following three have particular significance for realizing your dreams:

1. *When given a choice—take both!*—There must be some value in all options or they would not be presented. Take the best of each option. Do not dismiss either as not being the best.
2. *When faced without a challenge—make one!*—We are at our best when challenged. Challenge is not a threat, but is an opportunity to use our talents. Challenges should drive our life.
3. *When on thin ice—Dance!*—Do not expose your vulnerabilities. Those who are threatened by your ideas or concepts as well as by change will attempt to expose and attack your vulnerabilities and put you on the defense. You cannot create change from a defensive position. You cannot achieve compromise from a one-down position.

Peter taught us that the primary characteristic necessary to achieve your dreams is ***tenacity***—sticking with it no matter what. But "it" must be well thought-out and the potential barriers anticipated. Peter was doggedly tenacious; he clung to what he believed was right, no matter what the barriers. If you really believe in something, it is worth fighting for. And fight he did. He said that, "*If you can't beat them, join them, and then beat them.*" And that, "*Patience is a virtue, but persistence to the point of success is a blessing.*"

Peter used several techniques to accomplish his dreams when other strategies seemingly had failed. These included, but were not limited to use of the:

- *Helicopter Technique*—drop into many places to stir up dust, then bypass the usual channels and go directly to the top.
- *Bulldozer Technique*—proceed at full speed through any obstacle and do not stop for small deviations.
- *Water-Drop Technique*—talk and promote your ideas incessantly and everywhere; build a consensus and a constituency.

But his bottom line was *tenacity—tenacity—tenacity*. Barriers must be expected and anticipated before you attack. You may get beat up in the process. Compromise may become necessary, but keep on pushing forward. Peter stated that, "*When forced to compromise, ask for more*"; "*If you can't win, change the rules*"; and "*If you can't change the rules, then ignore them*". If it is worth it to you, you must persevere.

He taught that you must realize that things rarely come out exactly as you dreamed: to accept that you may not succeed, but not without doing all you can to pursue and realize the dream. Often, it helps to regroup and reframe the issues, and then try again. You know more about the issues than before you tried. But, achieve all that you can—there will be less to accomplish and you will achieve a tighter focus. And, when you do succeed, never rest on your laurels, for the momentum you achieved during the pursuit will help you achieve your next dream. Remember, "We all must die a bit before we can grow again".*(The Fantastics)* Know that more dreams will come, and your priorities may change as the world changes. There always will be another dream to follow.

Why did *he* do all of these things? Why do *we* do what we do? Why do we continue to make waves? Why do we believe it is important to pursue our dreams? Certainly, we do not receive financial incentives. Becoming involved in making a dream a reality doesn't relieve us from other duties and commitments. Usually, the unrelentingly chasing of our dreams does not contribute positively to our reputation or even appear on our CVs. Peter never did what he did for his reputation. Pursuing our dreams does not provide us with more control, nor do we wish it to. Often times, doggedly pursuing our dreams threatens some of our relationships. Peter did it out of *concern* for his fellow humans, as we do. We do it in a effort to attenuate the unnecessary pain and suffering of others. As Peter stated during our last conversation on 07 May 2003:

> *We do it because we want to make the world a better place... We do it to make our life a richer life... We do it because we are humanitarians... We do it because we care... We want to give our life meaning... If we search for meaning in our life, we give what we are doing, meaning, and one ends up productive and happy... When we realize we have used our talent, we will be more aware of our creativity... if you don't use your creativity, you waste some of it.*

But, it is impossible to achieve any of our dreams without being involved in the process of making them happen. You can't get it done from a distance. You can't wait for others to do it. You are more likely to accomplish your dreams when you combine your dreams with those of others and when others combine with you. There are people who share or will share your dreams. You must be involved. Find others with dreams that are similar to yours. Spread your dreams. Get others to go with you; your dreams will become real and will give your life *meaning*. Recall from the *Man from La Mancha*:

> *To dream the impossible dream, To fight the unbeatable foe, To bear with unbearable sorrow, To run where the brave dare not go;*
> *To right the unrightable wrong... To try when your arms are too weary, To reach the unreachable star...."*

Dr. Peter Safar was a descendent of the Man from La Mancha: he *believed*, no matter the struggle. He said, "There is no such word as 'impossible'." He believed in the potential of the human spirit and in the common language of human beings: he believed that music and art united all of mankind. He believed in us.

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Peter Safar's life serves as an inspirational example. It should serve as a model for each of us. There is more to life than just our science. You are a humanitarian or you would not be reading this journal. Be proud of it. Become and stay involved. Remember Peter's words: *"It's up to us to save the world!"*

The tributes that follow reflect the humanitarian aspects of Dr. Safar's life rather than the scientific components of which most of us are aware. The contributors volunteered to place their reflections onto paper. They contribute to the celebration of his great life.

Laws For the Navigation of Life

1. If anything can go wrong, Fix It!
2. When given a choice - Take Both!
3. Multiple projects lead to multiple successes.
4. Start at the top then work your way up.
5. Do it by the book but be the author.
6. When forced to compromise, ask for more.
7. If you can't beat them, join them, then beat them.
8. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right now.
9. If you can't win, change the rules.
10. If you can't change the rules, then ignore them.
11. Perfection is not optional.
12. When faced without a challenge, make one.
13. "No" simply means begin again at one level higher.
14. Don't walk when you can run.
15. Bureaucracy is a challenge to be conquered with a righteous attitude, a tolerance for stupidity, and a bulldozer when necessary.
16. When in doubt, think!
17. Patience is a virtue, but persistence to the point of success is a blessing.
18. The squeaky wheel gets replaced.
19. The faster you move, the slower time passes, the longer you live.
20. Death is not the enemy, but occasionally needs help with timing.
21. When on thin ice, dance.
22. It is up to us to save the world.

Table 1—Peter's Laws* For the Navigation of Life (The Creed of the Sociopathic, Obsessive Compulsive)
*Safar PJ, Fink BR, McGoldrick KE (eds): From Vienna to Pittsburgh for Anesthesiology and Acute Medicine. *Careers in Anesthesiology*, Volume V. Park Ridge, IL: Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology; 2000:343.

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