



A Piece of my Mind

Editorial Comment

Lessons learned from others

Maybe it's my age, or maybe it's a side effect of a year spent in virtual isolation, but I find myself thinking about what I've learned from other people.

Obituaries

In this issue, we have two obituaries, for Boet van der Merwe and Gus Ferguson. Both were active in the PSSA for many years. I suspect that's what started my train of thought.

Boet van der Merwe

Boet was the Executive Director of the PSSA when I first met him. I was a final year student and was elected as secretary of SAPSF. For the next two years, it was my responsibility to take minutes and prepare motions for conference. In those days, before the motions were taken to conference, I would visit Mr van der Merwe, a very gentle man and a gentleman. We would go through the proposed motions, and he would advise me on where we, as students, displayed incomplete knowledge or understanding of pharmacy practice. He also made sure that our motions were directed to the correct body – no point in complaining about something to the Pharmacy Board (as it was then) when it really should be directed to the Medicines Control Council. Mm, it reinforced my natural inclination to be a nit-picker!

After he retired, he spent more time playing his violin. Note to self: That piano isn't just ornamental – it needs to be played!

Gus Ferguson

Natie Finkelstein (who is one of my heroes, from whom I've learned so much) wrote such a beautiful tribute to Gus. He mentioned the Hymie Barnett award, which was awarded at the PSSA conference to the person who contributed most to the debate, or to the person who unintentionally said the funniest things in the heat of the moment. The prize for the winner was a sum of money which needed to be spent on a cultural event, such as a night at the theatre or an afternoon at a rugby match. (It took me a while to get my head around the thought of the rugby match.) I think buying a book of Gus's poetry would definitely be an appropriate cultural activity.

With Gus's unique thought patterns, the award also considered many hilarious and quirky comments. He would listen to every word spoken in a three-day meeting. All the serious stuff was seriously considered. But Gus also recorded the unintentionally funny things that people said in the heat of the moment. Gus was the chief judge, and I was privileged to be one of his assistant judges. I then served as head judge for some years, as did Gary Black.

I think that publishing his 2020 award speech in this issue of the SAPJ is the most fitting tribute that I can pay to his role in the PSSA, but it's also important to mention the way in which others remember him. (Yes, I *did* google him when I heard that he had passed away.) The

Pedal Power Association, for example, hailed him as a cycling legend. Apart from other contributions to cycling, before his retirement, Gus used to cycle to and from the office from Plumstead. This contributed about 12 000 km to his annual cycling distance!

He was also a publisher, poet, cartoonist and humourist – my signed copies of his books of poetry are treasured possessions. The tributes paid to him by South African poets, many of whom he had mentored, had me in tears. Many of his poems and cartoons involved snails and slugs – he was described as the Patron Saint of Escargots!

In a discussion with a past director of the National English Literary Museum, he said: "Snails' good points are that they are vegetarian, sensitive, slow-moving and lovely to look at, especially when the moonlight catches their glistening skin. No matter how beautiful the shell is on the outside, it is always more beautiful on the inside with its mother-of-pearl lining. This I consider the height of modesty."

Dorothy Steele (Goyns)

I also met Dorothy Steele, who was then the editor of the SAPJ, when I was a student. I didn't know then that she would influence my career choice sometime later! She also became my mother's best friend in later years. She did something that I know I wouldn't have the energy to do. At the age of 75, she graduated with a Masters degree in English literature. Her thesis was on the work of Zakes Mda, and she literally shadowed him for a while so that she got to know both him and his work extremely well. Sadly, she passed away very soon after that, but what enjoyment her work had given her!

The beauty of words

I've learned a lot from people who are no longer alive, but I've also learned a lot from people who are living. I promise. Maybe I'll share some of my thoughts on these in the next issue.

As you know, I love words and I love the way people use them. So I'll end on a cheerful note. When King Goodwill Zwelethini died, I happened to hear an explanation of some of the terminology that is used in Zulu culture. I absolutely loved them and I think I'll adopt them. (I spent many years in Durban, and have been told that I have a "Durban mentality" – which I took as a compliment – so I think I'm entitled to do so.)

The person being interviewed mentioned two terms – passing on and planting. She explained that "passing away" suggests that the person is gone forever, whereas "passing on" means that they have gone on to a new phase of their lives. "Burying" has the connotation of hiding, forgetting or being put underground, but she explained that "planting" is used instead because, after planting and watering, new growth occurs. What beautiful and comforting words to use at a time when you're in mourning.

So let's keep growing during our lives on earth as well!

Lorraine Osman