



THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE
Harvard University

Edwin H. “Ned” Cassem

Ned Cassem was born, along with his twin brother John, in Omaha, NE on January 24, 1935. Following high school graduation Ned entered the Jesuit novitiate at Florissant, MO on August 17, 1953. After the usual course of Jesuit formation in philosophy Ned went on to special studies, earning a degree in psychology from St. Louis University and completing pre-med studies at Marquette University. He graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1966 and received a Master’s of Divinity from Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, MA at the same time. Ordained a priest on June 4, 1970, he pronounced final vows in the Society of Jesus in 1985.

After completing his residency in psychiatry at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center, Ned joined the ranks of the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) where he remained until he retired. He worked in what was then the relatively new field of consultation psychiatry under the psychiatrist-neurologist Avery Weisman; many years later later Ned became the Chief of the Avery Weisman Psychiatry Consultation Service, succeeding Thomas P. Hackett when Dr. Hackett was named as Chief of the MGH Department of Psychiatry. Together with George B. Murray, another MGH Jesuit priest-psychiatrist, Ned established the premier fellowship training program in consultation psychiatry in the world. Many of today’s leaders in the field launched their careers from this platform.

Although Ned helped bring MGH Psychiatry to clinical preeminence, including consistent #1 ratings on the US News & World Report list for Psychiatry, he was always a reluctant torch-bearer. Although he had no ambition for a role in administration – upon the death of his dear friend Tom Hackett it became clear that Ned was the right person to take the reins of the department into the next decade; he accepted the position in 1989 and continued as Chief of Psychiatry at MGH until 2000. He was appointed Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School in 1995.

Ned blended his dual vocations as physician and priest seamlessly. At the bedside, in the clinic, and in other teaching venues, his example recalled the words of Basil Cardinal Hume, the late Archbishop of Westminster, who wrote: “The doctor and the priest have much in common. Both are concerned with people, with their well-being...pain, suffering and death.” “It is exactly the same,” Ned would reply when asked to describe his approach as a doctor and as a priest. “Doctor of body and doctor of feelings and spirit.”

Ned’s involvement with, and deep experience of, others drove his work in all areas of clinical care, especially care provided to individuals at the end of life. Among his many contributions was his founding of the Optimum Care Committee (Ethics Committee) at the MGH in 1973, a committee which he chaired until 2009. Ned was an indefatigable protector of the dignity of every patient treated at the MGH, often going to court to plead for patient’s rights.

*In tribute to their dedicated efforts to science and medicine, deceased members of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine (those at the rank of full or emeritus professor) receive a review of their life and contributions with a complete reflection, a **Memorial Minute**.*

Those who knew Ned will recall that he was rarely without a bright smile on his face and a welcoming word for everyone he encountered. Walking through the hospital hallways with him was always a lengthy adventure as he stopped to say hello and catch up with so many staff and patients along the way. He had a special way of comforting his patients and he was a shining example of how to care for all with respect, patience, and empathy. The stories of Ned's ability to reach even the most difficult patients could fill volumes. For instance, one day Ned was called to a surgical floor because of an extremely troubled and troubling patient that the clinicians were managing with great difficulty. Nurses were surprised to hear Ned's familiar laugh bellowing from her bedside after a short time in the room. When he exited, he told them that in his conversation with her, he learned that the woman had lived an interesting life, including being an Olympic athlete. Ned taught us all that when caring for a severely debilitated or dying patient, you should always treat that person as you would if they were still on top of their game.

In 1995, health care lawyer Ken Schwartz wrote in the Boston Globe Magazine that cancer "has been a harrowing experience for me and for my family. And yet, the ordeal has been punctuated by moments of exquisite compassion. I have been the recipient of an extraordinary array of human and humane responses to my plight. These acts of kindness — the simple human touch from my caregivers — have made the unbearable bearable." Most of the article focused on the extraordinary care Ned provided as a part of the cancer center's team to Mr. Schwartz. Ned's "human touch" inspired the development of the Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare, which has had a tremendous impact on the development and support of gifted and compassionate caregivers across the nation.

On occasion Ned's presence seemed ethereal. One of us will never forget Ned visiting his elderly encephalopathic and unresponsive father in his MGH hospital room. Before Ned could be seen entering the room, Mr. Jenike alerted from unconsciousness and looked up at Ned as he came into view.

Ned also conducted groundbreaking research on the relationship between depression and heart disease. Along with his mentor Tom Hackett, he spearheaded efforts to understand and treat the psychiatric complications associated with care in the coronary care unit.

As a teacher, Ned was uniquely gifted, whether standing at a podium before a thousand physicians or teaching students and trainees at the bedside. We will be forever grateful for his dedication to the service and for the countless residents and fellows he taught during his tenure. For trainees in Psychosomatic Medicine in particular he was a guiding inspiration—our "true North", an exemplar of what a caring and skilled clinician should be. He was also a clinical innovator, finding better ways to treat delirium, depression secondary to medical illness, and catatonia. After he first used lorazepam to successfully abort catatonia, now the first -line treatment for this condition, nurses at the MGH were flabbergasted; they asked what he had given to transform the patient and he nonchalantly replied, "Why, holy water, of course..."

Ned was a co-editor of The MGH Handbook of General Hospital Psychiatry, a touchstone for trainees and practitioners of psychosomatic medicine. In 2009, Harvard established an endowed chair in Ned's honor, the Ned H. Cassem Professor of Psychiatry in the field of Psychosomatic Medicine/Consultation, now held by Theodore A. Stern.

Throughout his career, Ned served in, and led, many professional organizations including the Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine, the American Psychosomatic Society, the American College of Physicians,

the Society of Critical Care Medicine, and the American Psychiatric Association. An extraordinary physician with a laser-sharp mind, Ned always strove for excellence, whether in his academic accomplishments or in clinical practice. He was generous, and offered mentorship and counsel to many members of the medical community. He motivated mostly through example—by outworking all of us and knowing more than we could ever hope to know. He could indicate his displeasure through “giving brow” but he also rewarded. His trainees relished doing something to elicit one of his booming laughs.

“No one ever forgot him once they met him,” said his sister-in-law Audrey Cassem of West Hartford, who recalled family trips to Ireland and Block Island where Ned would teach her grandchildren about birds and their calls. In addition to loving travel, Ned was an avid runner who ran the Boston Marathon several times. He was also a scuba diver and underwater photographer and won awards for target shooting.

MGH was dear to Ned. It was his workplace where he worked tirelessly for patients. It was his home. It was his parish where he quietly ministered. He would often say, “I ride for the MGH brand!” We are learning more these days about the heavy medical toll caregiver stress can take on physicians and other caregivers. So perhaps it is not surprising that during his career this incredibly devoted physician withstood a myocardial infarction and prostate cancer before finally succumbing to neurodegenerative disease.

In all these ways Edwin H. “Ned” Cassem epitomized the words of Edward Churchill, etched in the MGH’s lobby wall— “Charity, in its broad spiritual sense, that is, the desire to relieve suffering, is the most prized possession of Medicine.” Ned taught us all to safeguard this prized possession at all costs.

Ned Cassem died following a fireworks display on July 4, 2015. We will miss him.

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