

Phillip J. Resnick, MD: Master Educator

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... We need teachers of wide learning, whose standards of work are the highest known, and whose methods are those of the masters. . . . —Sir William Osler, MD (Ref. 1, p 29)

“Thank you for your willingness to make this video for teaching purposes.” This is the opening refrain that is familiar to legions of Dr. Resnick’s students. At the outset, when making a video for teaching purposes, the master thanks his willing participant. Though the participant may be a murdering necrophile, the master is impartial. Sometimes, even benevolent. The master will use the video to conduct an effortless symphony of precision, clarity, and humor. Having laughed and learned, the audience will leave thoroughly pleased and satisfied.

Summing up the life and essence of a master is a difficult thing. Within the wide sphere of influence of the exceptional teacher, there are many who benefit. There are many varieties of students, initiates, and disciples who, in turn, continue to push the ripple of knowledge outward. Here, then, is homage paid by a disciple who realizes that he may not do the master justice.

After graduating from Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) with a degree in psychology, Phillip Resnick knew he wanted to enter a helping profession. He was aware that he was a good listener. After graduating from medical school at CWRU, he served in the United States Army, ultimately attaining the rank of Captain. While serving at Valley Forge Hospital in the mid-1960s, he directed a women’s inpatient psychiatry ward where he treated two patients who would influence the course of his career.

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Phillip J. Resnick, MD

The two women had murdered their children. The contrast of grief, psychopathology, and horror made an everlasting impact on Dr. Resnick. Being both inquisitive and ambitious, he resolved to write about this experience, and in doing so, coined the term neonaticide. His papers on filicide and neonaticide demonstrated his clear, organizational approach and became the most commonly cited works on this subject in the world.^{2,3} Careful inspection of the published articles shows that he completed his research for the study while still in residency.

The landmark papers were to be the first in a long line of contributions to the field. In his home city of Cleveland, there were no mentors in forensics, and so from 1975 to 1977, he completed law courses in criminal, family, and tort law, and evidence at

CWRU School of Law. He found that he had a knack for presenting material clearly and distilling a lucid summary from complex matters. In searching for ways to make use of these skills, he began his teaching career. At John Carroll University in Ohio, he began teaching a course in Aggression, Psychiatry, and the Law. While leading this course, he developed his inimitable lecture style.

Having fully realized that a career immersed in teaching and forensic psychiatry was his destiny, he accepted a position as director of the Court Psychiatric Clinic of Cleveland, which he has occupied since 1976. At the Court Clinic, he cultivated a model program that now conducts forensic evaluations of some 3,000 felons per year. Fellows work with him, learning to emulate his meticulous and logical report-writing style. In 1979, he started the forensic psychiatry fellowship that became one of his greatest passions. The fellowship came to be regarded as one of the finest in the country, not to mention the most intense and demanding. To date, he has trained more than 56 fellows.

Phillip Resnick quickly became recognized as a national leader in forensic psychiatry. After the verdict in *United States v. Hinckley*,⁴ he was asked to give testimony before the National Commission on the Insanity Defense in 1982 in Washington, D.C. In 1983, he enhanced his national profile by coteaching a psychiatric expert witness course with famed personal-injury lawyer and “king of torts,” Melvin Belli. In 1984, he was elected president of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law (AAPL). Still keeping education in the forefront, he became the founding president of the Association of Directors of Forensic Psychiatry Fellowships in 1986.

From the mid-1980s on, Dr. Resnick’s educational contributions have exceeded those of some entire departments of psychiatry. He has served on numerous forensic task forces and has been on the editorial boards of more than half a dozen forensic journals. He has authored more than 120 articles and book chapters. He is probably most admired for his superb national and international lectures, which are accompanied by his extensive video and audiotape teaching productions. To date, he has lectured in 17 different countries.

The honors he has received include the Seymour Pollack Distinguished Achievement Award (1991), a Presidential Commendation for the Forensic Psychiatry Review Course (1998), the Isaac Ray Award for

outstanding contributions to forensic psychiatry (2002), and the Golden Apple Award for significant contributions to forensic psychiatry (2002). Strike up a conversation about Dr. Resnick in most academic or forensic circles, and you are likely to hear an outpouring of admiration and respect.

A Great Teacher

I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.—John Steinbeck⁵

Phillip Resnick considers himself a teacher above all else. He currently teaches six half-day courses at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association (APA). While he is widely regarded as the finest educator in American forensic psychiatry, it also “goes without saying that no man can teach successfully who is not at the same time a student” (Ref. 1, p 419). His approach to education is the very model of a life-long student. Fellows and students wanting to do a rotation with Dr. Resnick are often chosen because they might have knowledge to share with him.

He spends hours in crafting a lecture, and his course, *How to Give a More Effective Lecture*, has been widely praised at APA meetings. He is always searching for ways to improve the teaching and learning experience. In his teaching style, he involves the audience. Students have the highest regard for the teacher who “is no longer on a height, pumping knowledge at high pressure into passive receptacles. . . but he [who] is a senior student anxious to help his juniors. . . ” (Ref. 1, pp 399–400). Perhaps this is why he has enjoyed a 30-year adjunct professorship at the CWRU School of Law.

A True Master

Only one who devotes himself to a cause with his whole strength and soul can be a true master. For this reason mastery demands all of a person.—Albert Einstein⁶

Clarifying the complex is a unique skill, and one that seems to come naturally to Dr. Resnick. For example, with his knowledge of relevant statutes and controlling case law, he often finds himself in a position of knowing more about a circumscribed area of the law than do the attorneys in the case—a truly astonishing thing to witness first hand. A common scenario unfolds in a judge’s chamber at the Cleve-

land Court Clinic: both attorneys and the judge cannot agree on a legal issue in an insanity case. Dr. Resnick arrives with fellows in tow and proceeds to sum up the issue with a clarity that approximates the lifting of a veil from the room's collective consciousness. A silent, but appreciative nod of affirmation from the judge dispenses with the issue.

This partly explains why, if a case makes national headlines and involves mental illness, Dr. Resnick is often called by attorneys seeking to retain him as an expert. The case is going to be the subject of intense public scrutiny, and they need the best there is. They need an expert's expert. Dr. Resnick has been involved in nationally publicized trials of people like William Kennedy Smith, Jeffrey Dahmer, Timothy McVeigh, Terry Nichols, Ted Kaczynski, Russell Weston, Andrea Yates, and Scott Pederson.

Dr. Resnick acknowledges that he thrives in the harsh spotlight of these high-profile cases. The intensity and scrutiny that would induce anxiety in most are his invigorating tonic. In fact, it brings out his best performance. When testifying in the highly publicized Andrea Yates trial, he underwent hours of cross-examination. A CBS reporter who witnessed the spectacle later wrote:

Resnick's position was no less clear or authoritative or definitive. In fact, it's arguable that Resnick's command of the subject matter. . . is even more apparent to jurors today than it was last week. He was that good. . . . I'm glad I never have to duel with him in a courtroom and it's easy to see why he has the reputation he does in his field. . . . Resnick is simply in a different league.⁷

A Thorough Artist

Thoroughness is the most difficult habit to acquire, but it is the pearl of great price, worth all the worry and trouble of the search.—Sir William Osler, MD (Ref. 1, p 401)

It is not at all uncommon for attorneys to observe Phillip Resnick's testimony and take notes. He is well known for his meticulous preparation. During the Unabomber case, Dr. Resnick (along with Park Dietz) visited Theodore Kaczynski's cabin, interviewed his neighbors, and walked along the same route that Kaczynski had taken. In addition, Dr. Resnick reviewed some 22,000 pages of documents, including Kaczynski's diaries and infamous manifesto.

This is the approach that Dr. Resnick tries to take in every case, high-profile or not. It is an approach born of the intent to be as thorough as possible, as accurate as possible and, in the end, as certain as

possible. By the time he takes the witness stand, there is a high probability that he knows the facts of the case better than many of the attorneys. Certainly, some of his meticulous qualities stem from an unrelenting work ethic.

Yet, in a sense, work "ethic" may have a misleading connotation. His drive to work comes mainly from passionate enjoyment and less from a sense of mere obligation. To him, forensic work is not onerous or taxing. It is simply something he loves to do. Take, for example, the time he developed a cough and fever while involved in the *Weston* case. Dr. Resnick's dilemma was that Weston had recently gone on a delusional shooting rampage at the United States Capitol building and was waiting at a jail to be evaluated. Dr. Resnick's cough is immortalized on his teaching video of the Weston interview. Upon returning to Cleveland, he was found to have pneumonia.

A Humorous Professor

Laughter need not be cut out of anything, since it improves everything.—James Thurber⁸

One of the features of Resnick's lectures that makes them so appealing is his sense of humor. Many of his fellows could recite his lecture jokes by heart, as could many other AAPL members. Yet, like a good *Seinfeld* episode, the jokes seem to remain ever fresh. His is a sense of humor that, like his testimony, is pithy and spontaneous. It grabs the listener and startles him with an unexpected but welcome jolt.

The Resnick Fellowship Experience

A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.—Henry Adams⁹

Throughout the year I spent with Phillip Resnick as a forensic fellow, one thing remained very clear. The fellows were constantly at the center of his attention. I cannot forget this, despite the high-profile cases, the relentless work pace, and the perpetual lecture circuits. The fellows have the undeniable confidence that despite the demands placed on Dr. Resnick, his overriding priority is training them. They are often right there with him, every step of the way, observing nationally known cases unfold before them.

Want to study with a master? Step lively! You are about to be under the precision scanning microscope of a living legend in the field of forensic psychiatry.

You will subject yourself to one year of what is likely to be the most intense and humbling critique of your abilities that you have ever faced. You will come away with an unshakable foundation of knowledge and a life-altering experience. Will it be demanding? Unequivocally. Will you have to set your ego aside for maximum learning? Undoubtedly. However, “It is Dr. Resnick’s intense scrutiny of his fellows’ and students’ work that wins their admiration.”¹⁰

Identification with the aggressor? Tearing down and remolding? *Resnification*? Call it what you will, it’s a system that works. Intensive fellowship training with a small number of trainees is perhaps the closest thing medicine now has to a true apprenticeship with a senior physician. It is in the fellowship that teaching truly goes beyond mere methods and involves the character and life experience of the mentor. It is from the fellowship that the odds are increased that the trainee “may take fire, and the glow of enthusiasm may be the inspiration of his life” (Ref. 1, p 402). Indeed, at least nine former Resnick fellows have

gone on to become directors of forensic psychiatry programs. The ripples of knowledge are flowing outward, and AAPL members harvest the benefits.

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