A Tribute to Dr. Fredrick J. Stare, 1910-2002

By ACSH Staff — April 13, 2002

Remarks delivered at Wellesley Congregational Church, Saturday, April 13, 2002.

Irene, David, Fred, Mary, other family members and colleagues, I appreciate the opportunity to offer a brief commentary on Fred Stare, one of the most remarkable people I have had the great honor and pleasure to know. I first met Dr. Stare almost thirty years ago when I interviewed him for a project I was proposing: a book called Panic in the Pantry. By that point, he was already distinguished and impressively accomplished as a scholar in nutrition, an author, and a hands-on provider of improved nutrition for people around the world.

I was soon privileged to work with him at the Department of Nutrition at Harvard; to co-author newspaper columns, articles in magazines like Family Weekly, Harper's Bazaar, and others; and to collaborate with him on a series of consumer-oriented books. Ultimately, we teamed up as founding directors of the American Council on Science and Health. How to describe this remarkable person?

Succinct is one word to describe him.

The consumer queries came in: Dear Dr. Stare, What should I eat? "Less!" he would bellow. The first time I was his guest for lunch at the Harvard Club, he asked what I was ordering. "A tuna sandwich," I replied. He came back: "A fine choice; I will have half of yours."

Blunt is another word that comes to mind.

I came across a book review he did years ago, authored by someone whose only credentials in nutrition were the fact she ate three times a day. Fred wrote that Eat Right for Your Type "is not only one of the most preposterous books on the market but also the most frightening. It contains just enough scientific nonsense, carefully woven into complex theory, to actually seem convincing to the uninitiated...the author pieced together the outrageous hypothesis that blood type determines which food should be eaten. He could just as easily have chosen to link food choice with eye color. Outrageous...nothing short of sheer nonsense!"

Back in the 1950s, he got considerable attention when he told the Boston Nutrition Society, which had issued pejorative comments to McCall's magazine about white bread. Fred told them what he thought of their grasp of nutrition: "to imply or suggest that enriched, white bread can cause or contribute to heart disease and cancer...is cruel and reckless fraud."
At the American Council's first national press conference, he patiently explained to the media the semantic nuances distinguishing the word "quack" from "charlatan." When a Washington Post reporter then asked if a certain prominent consumer advocate was a charlatan or a quack, Fred pondered for five seconds and responded crisply: "both."

How many other professors of nutrition would, in our age of chemicalphobia, be so blunt as to have a book chapter entitled "Eat Your Food Additives They're Good for You."

Courageous is another word to characterize Fred Stare...

...because being as feisty and outspoken and out of step with the popular wisdom carried consequences. The Boston Nutrition Society sued him in 1959 for his bread quote. He and I, along with columnist Ann Landers, were sued in 1979 for 1.3 million dollars, accused of conspiracy to undermine the health food business, for writing various columns and books and for forming ACSH. Both cases were eventually dismissed.

Impervious to criticism is another characterization.

Fred Stare seemed to brush off or actually revel in the absurd and unjustified criticisms that were regularly hurled at him by advocates of health nonsense. One particular case in point was a frustrated, agitated critic from the media who attempted to condemn both of us with one sweeping analogy but only made us delight in what we perceived as a compliment. Referring to antioxidant/food preservatives, the young woman sneered at us, saying, "Elizabeth Whelan and Fredrick Stare go as well together as BHA and BHT."

And last but not least: caring. Yes, Fred Stare was succinct, blunt, courageous, and impervious all of these "tough" things because he genuinely cared about science, nutrition, and the American people. So he dedicated his life to ensuring that we would not be bamboozled and misled by the quacks and charlatans who prey on the fears of an uninformed public. He stood up for common sense and science, and he weathered the storms of assaults, accusations, and insults that go with becoming a great pioneer.

I have had the pleasure of getting to know members of Fred's family, particularly Irene who in the 1980s re-encountered "the breeze from the East," as Fred was called and, among others, his extraordinarily talented and accomplished grandson, Ben Wilkinson.

Fred Stare's life should be celebrated for the extraordinary success it was in so many ways. Quoting from the writing of Henry David Thoreau: He was "a man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action...and above all, a man of ideas and principles. That was what distinguished him."

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