



SIMPLY SIMCHES

For more than four decades Professor Seymour Simches has encouraged students to experience learning as a deeply personal and lifelong quest

TO GENERATIONS OF TUFTS STUDENTS he is known as Seymour, and it is an apt form of address for a teacher who has never lost his own sense of being a student. Even now, Seymour Simches, the Emeritus John Wade Professor of Romance Languages, who retired in 1990, is preparing lesson plans for a class on mentorship and human values at the Experimental College. If, at age 78, he keeps teaching, and asking questions about what he calls “coming to self,” it is because of a lifelong passion for learning.

He was born in 1919, the last of six children, to Jewish Lithuanian immigrants in Dorchester, MA, where his father was a tailor. With no means of advancement other than an insatiable desire to study French and French literature, he graduated magna cum laude from Boston University and went on to Harvard, where he earned his master’s and doctorate. He arrived at Tufts in 1954 as an assistant professor of Romance Languages, soon rising to full professor and in 1962 to John Wade Professor of Modern Languages. As he says, “I’ve lived my life in the academic community, where learning is the blood of life.”

Professor Simches’ advocacy for students is legendary. It is commitment all-embracing, from introducing college students to Voltaire to responding to the restlessness of the 1970s through the innovative curriculum changes; from training elementary teachers how to excite the interest of children to charting a course for the Tufts European Center in Talloires, France. On the Hill, he was a former chair of the Department of Romance Languages (a position he held for 12 years), director of the College Within and one of the founders of the Experimental College, and founding director of the Tufts European Center. On the national level, he was active during the 1960s as an advocate for teaching languages to young children. He was vice chair of the Northeast Conference Foreign Languages Teachers, a consultant on Foreign Languages for the Department of Education, and director of the National Defense Education Act foreign language institutes. And on the international scale, he was the founding director of the Tufts European Center, and director of the Institute International Linguistique Boulogne-sur-mer. For these contributions, the French Government has honored him with three medals in the Order des Palmes Academiques.

As Tufts celebrates the 20th anniversary of the Tufts European Center, it seems appropriate to pay homage to its founding director and dedicated teacher who encourages a quest for knowledge in all his students. In the words of a current undergraduate: “Seymour gives freely of his talents, knowledge, wealth of experience, and even his time, because he cares about his students so completely. . . . This demonstrates his genuine willingness, consideration, and profound interest in the lives of all of his students. He treats them as one would treat a friend.”

Laura Ferguson

PHOTOGRAPH-ED MALITSKY

In this issue we are marking the 20th anniversary of the Tufts European Center, of which you are the founding director. Did you see something worth working toward in taking on that job in 1979?

I’ve always rushed in where angels fear to tread. I started the Experimental College in 1964, and the College Within in 1969. So I saw an opportunity to advance the university on an international level.

You must remember Mr. Donald MacJannet, who gave the building, the Priory in Talloires, to Tufts. How would you describe him?

Mr. Mac was a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful man. His love for Tufts knew no bounds. He was essentially Mr. Tufts, and wherever he went he talked often about his deep fondness for certain teachers, Leo Lewis and others. Mr. Mac told us a story once, for example, when the United States was celebrating its bicentennial in 1976. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip had just come to the States, and Mr. Mac was invited to a high-level meeting. As he walked by Prince Philip, who had been a student at Mr. Mac’s school in Paris, Philip grabbed his hand and said, “Mr. Mac, Mr. Mac,” and began singing the Tufts alma mater: “We con beside thy knee, dear Alma Mater . . .” It seems that in his school MacJannet had printed up 50 Tufts songs, many written by Professor Leo Lewis, and made his students, including Indira Gandhi and Prince Philip, learn all 50 of them.

It seemed natural for him to donate the Priory to Tufts, then.

In the 1960s, Mr. Mac decided that the Priory was too difficult to restore by himself, and too costly. He decided to offer the Center to Tufts, his beloved alma mater. On each of his visits to Tufts he would try to persuade the presiding president to accept the Priory, but their feeling was that it constituted a white elephant. With President Jean Mayer, it was different. He was a devoted Frenchman, and for his involvement in the French Resistance he had won over 16 decorations. Jean Mayer loved that region of France, and without any hesitation he accepted the MacJannet gift. Dr. Mayer had a tremendous vision for Tufts. He saw the Center as a way of making Tufts an international community. One day, two weeks later, he called me on the phone: “Seymour, how would you like to be the first director of the facility?” I accepted.

Most people, I hear, are changed by the beauty of the region.

Yes, this is true. For me, the region of Talloires is a mountain paradise. The Savoyards are a mountain people, loving and caring and down to earth. But I think what makes it special is that it’s a retreat in time. You feel that you are

in a very old place, a sanctified retreat. There is a sense of community that goes down through the ages, and an understanding of what it means to speak French. I used to go on sabbatical to Paris with my family when I was working on my research—I was interested in aesthetic tastes of the Louis XIV and XV period. What I saw was this persistent idea of costumes, clothes and disguise. It's narcissistic as hell. The need to show off for glory is fundamental in Paris, as expressed in the hall of mirrors at Versailles. If you're not seen, you're nobody. If Louis XIV doesn't look at you, you're dead. Paris is a theater. It's always been a theater.

So Talloires spoke quite differently to you.

Yes, it is an inviting place. The green grass is just like the green of Vermont. It's a welcoming carpet. The mountains are inviting, too, even in the month of July when my wife could open up the windows and look out on Les Dents de L'enfant [the Teeth of the Child]. Even in July they were covered in snow, so you could not look at them without feeling a sense of spirituality. There is no question: Talloires is a very spiritual place. Four of the happiest years of my life were spent there with my wife, Marcia.

What were some of the ideas about organizing a curriculum for Tufts students?

My idea was to have students go over there to study French, definitely French. I did not want the Center to become a place where all the courses were given in English. I remember giving a talk to the Rotary Club in Annecy, and I remember the words I spoke: *Ce n'est pas un centre américain*. "This is not an American center." I promised to organize courses also for the inhabitants of the region. That's what happened. All courses were taught in French, the only exceptions being a course in alpine geology and one in botany. All students also had to live with local French families. I also taught a course in the culture of Haute Savoie in French for French majors and majors in international relations.

Then, after the students left, we had six more weeks of summer, and I said: "This is a good time to do something for the French." So I gave courses in the English language. I gave special courses for the doctors at the hospital in Annecy in medical vocabulary. Our staff gave a series of lectures on American life. I invited then Dean of the Faculty Bernard Harleston to come to Talloires to speak on American racism. That evening lasted until midnight.

You were an ally to the French people.

Yes. The happiest day of my first year as director was when I saw posted near the post office the sign "Le Tufts University, Ancien Prioré de Talloires." I thought to myself: "We made it."

For the students coming to Tufts, did you envision the Center as an essential college experience?

Absolutely. Anything that exposes you to a different culture is a learning experience, and everyone should have that experience. One thing I am proud of is that I started the Tufts in Paris program in '64. My critics said, "Seymour, there are so many programs in Paris, why do you want one at Tufts?" But my answer was: "The kid from Tufts can go to Paris through another program run by CCNY or Mount Holyoke, but they are going to have to pay for it." I was a very poor student. I wanted the student who had a tuition scholarship to Tufts to be able to use that for a Tufts abroad program.

Access does seem to be a critical issue for you as a teacher

of foreign culture. Why did you feel so strongly about it?

It's always been my purpose to arrange situations where there is a confrontation. Not in a bad sense, but between the two cultures. I want to bring people together. I love using the words "confrontation of dialogue." It's important that you know the person who's speaking the other language is a member of that culture. That's why I like to have students living here at my home; I've had Chinese students, Japanese students. I learn so much from them. But I've always been interested in bringing cultures together. The last time was in 1995 at Alumni College. I gave a course on Moliere's *Imaginary Invalid* and the Americans played different roles, which was very funny. That's what I love. I hate this typical American idea of a tour—you turn right, look straight ahead, and there's the Mona Lisa. I have a very strong feeling that traveling in a different country should be a participation in that culture, not an express tour abroad.

To what do you attribute your ability to relate to the French people?

I love them. I love what they stand for. I love their literature because it expresses the philosophy of the human condition.

But why French?

I got turned onto it at Latin High School in Dorchester, and it was a way of getting out of the ghetto, so to speak. I have also always thought, from an intellectual point of view, that it's the most active literature. France, in every century, has produced great masterpieces that tell the story of our times, and of what it means to be human.

Do you have a favorite period of French history?

I would say the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment. Most people do not realize how much we owe to the French Enlightenment for our own system of American government. I refer you to the Constitutional Assembly, 1787, where Mr. Madison states, "We must listen to the ideas of Montesquieu," and everyone asks, "Who is Montesquieu?" Madison pulls out the book *The Spirit of Law*, where Montesquieu advises three offices of government: the executive, the judicial, and the legislative. That's where the idea came from. The French thought of it first, but they could never put their ideas into practice—in 1789 they became caught up in a revolution of a class society, leading to extremes, like the Reign of Terror in 1793.

You've received four honorary awards from France for your service, the last three for academic contributions, but the first—the Medaille de L'Aeronatique, in 1945—for your service during World War II. How did that come about?

That's an interesting story. I had graduated in 1942 with a master's in French from Harvard, and I went into the service as a weather observer. I remember that the captain asked me, "Where do you want to be stationed?" I wanted to go back to Boston, obviously, I wanted to go to the West Coast or to Alaska where I could read books in my igloo. Where did they send me? Montgomery, Alabama. I was so disappointed. I had been there for six or eight months forecasting the weather when the colonel of the base sent for me—I was only a sergeant at the time—and he said to me, "I see you studied French. Do you speak it? Do you think you can get ready to

teach a course on meteorology in French? We're going to be training Free French pilots." Now, that's the most extraordinary thing. What is the probability that out of 400 military bases, I should be serving at the one where they would be training French pilots? One in a million. I truly believed in God then.

I must ask you about the craft of teaching, because whenever students talk about you, they glow with admiration. What do you think makes you so special to so many students?

I love what I do. I have a strong feeling for teaching. I don't like to merely transfer information.

What does it mean to you to be a good teacher?

I am a disciple of Carl Rogers, who wrote an important book called *Freedom to Learn*, which evaluates the traditional class, where a teacher stands in front of rows of chairs and tells students what to learn and asks them to reproduce all that in an examination. The students are just listening, not necessarily learning. Instead, Rogers says, "every teacher must be a learner, and every learner must be a teacher." I say this the first day of class every September. I believe that the chance for an older person to come together with a young person is an extraordinary medium of exchange. But you, as a teacher, have to listen. You have to plant the seeds and water the plant so that it can grow, find out what is in the student and encourage that seed to grow.

In that case a good teacher would be a mentor.

Exactly. I see no separation.

What qualities make a mentor?

The dignity and importance of their thoughts, and their human qualities. A certain generosity of spirit, the urge to know young people and what makes them tick.

Do you think something of your own struggle for education, and the necessity of university scholarships, has influenced this philosophy?

Yes, in the sense that I wanted to help students as I was helped. I had an affinity with the students at Tufts because when I came in 1947, most of the students were local. I felt a fatherly feeling for them, much more than at Harvard. At Tufts I felt a certain connection that I loved. The students were so open, so friendly and anxious to learn that I knew this was the place I wanted to be. I was offered the vice presidency of Clark University and I didn't want it.



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I think you also simply have to have a keen desire to work with young people.

Yes, and I had good training. I was a tutor at Harvard in Adams House when I was a graduate student there, and my job was to work with majors in French and help them with their senior thesis. But whenever I met a student I was never satisfied with asking, "What is your major?" I would always ask, "What is your myth?"

What do you mean?

By myth I mean a journey. I want to find out where they are going, why they are going there and where they find out they are wrong. If you fall, you are not journeying according to your own personality but according to what your parents or others expect of you. The idea of the myth takes in the idea of the persona, which is the mask you wear, and the self.

And what is your myth?

I think I've come somewhat close to the spiritual confidence in God and in myself.

What do you think your self is?

I will tell you what my self is. Little by little I've been creating that self. I don't need to be a "distinguished professor." The real me is a fool. I was very young, the youngest, an afterthought, my mother was 42, which was old in those days to be having children. I had very bad asthma and couldn't go outside or play with anybody. My brothers and sisters called me Sinky, a love name, and made me dance and sing for them. They would say, "Sinky, now do your dance," and they would laugh . . . so I think the real me is a fool. In great drama, there was always the fool, who is given that rare gift of insight that I call "crazy wisdom." I would say that being a fool gives me the gift of seeing through the

madness of the world into the sublimity of it to be able to recognize light and darkness, to attain an earthly paradise and essentially to come to God, who gave us this gift in the first place. Also, the wise fool has love—love for God and love for our neighbors . . . and love for students!