

In Remembrance of My Very Dear Friend and Colleague

Prof. Vincent Nwuga

The Gentle Human Catalyst

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The jolt of Vincent's passing arrived in an email message of June 30, 2015 from the Nigeria Physiotherapy Network. I am still recovering from the shock of his passing and I am struggling to access the memory of our friendship and collegiality over many decades especially his support during my pioneer Physiotherapy student years at the University of Ibadan, the Nigeria/Biafra civil war, and the many things we did together while figuring out our future career paths. I was hoping to visit him during my next trip home. I called him last year to indicate my intention and to cheer him up as he was encountering some medical challenges. I had tears in my eyes when my dear friend could not speak clearly over the telephone. Since then, I have been engaged in continual prayer and self-examination in the context of our very close relationship.



Figure 1 (L) Vincent Nwuga and Godwin Eni 1968

There is no doubt that Vincent was a visionary, a gentleman of the first order, and a very intelligent human being. Rather than wallow in sorrow, I would rather remind his many protégées and colleagues of the admirable part of him they never knew, the subtle aspects of his persona that led to the great things he accomplished in life, and his great sense of humor.

Vince [I call him Vince and he calls me Goddy] and I met late in 1968 at the University College Hospital Ibadan where he began work as a Physiotherapist following his studies in the United Kingdom. I was the first Physiotherapy student in clinical training at the hospital under Mr., now Dr. T.A. Oshin and Dr. Richards, an orthopedic surgeon who was designated head of the University's Physiotherapy degree program. Vince was the only staff closer to my age. He was born in

1939 and I was born in 1938 – something I always teased him about in private as his elder. We immediately formed a bond. Although a physiotherapy student, I was receiving training as a medical student – Anatomy, Biochemistry, Physiology, Pathology, Microbiology, Haematology and even surgical assistance in orthopedic surgery – and residing with medical students or classmates at the Clinical Students Hostel. I complained in private to Vince about my training as I knew little then about the profession of Physiotherapy. He cautioned me in his characteristic quiet manner that as a Physiotherapist I must work under doctor's orders and not to think of myself as a doctor. I wasn't

pleased about that reality and status of physiotherapy as a dependent profession. In a way, Vince lit my future motivation to do something about that dependency.

I did not think the University knew what to do with me as a trainee professional. Thanks to Dr. T. Abayomi Oshin who was the clinical head of Physiotherapy department as well as an instructor at the University. He was designated to provide me with academic and professional training. He was a chattered Physiotherapist at the time. I used to argue with Vince about the difference between a chattered physiotherapist and a degree physiotherapist. I entertained the idea of leaving the program until Vince told me that MCSP and B.Sc. degree are equivalent. According to him, the difference lies in the venue where each is granted, whether the United Kingdom or Nigeria. Brilliant!! He further explained that MCSP trained physiotherapists are the most versatile and clinically proficient therapists. He was right. The expertise, and clinical competence and professionalism exhibited by my colleagues at the hospital [Mr. Obiri, Kehinde, Gladys, Ajao, Oshin and Vincent] were excellent.

Regardless of the equivalence of MCSP and degree designation suggested by Vince, I found myself slotted at a higher salary category because of my degree. It took me sometime to convince Vince to pursue a degree designation because he was so good and intelligent and I visualized him as a future saviour of the profession. I was also being considered for faculty appointment but I had to undergo further graduate training. At the time I was very unhappy as an Ibo due to the civil war and fear for my safety. Professor Adesanya Grillo [my Anatomy professor and mentor] and Professor Odeku [Dean of



Figure 2 1969 Vincent and Gladys at Godwin's Physiotherapy Graduation University of Ibadan

Medicine and later VC] were worried about me as the first Nigeria trained physiotherapist. They protected me and also worried about my safety after many brushes with the military and civilians. The University, I understood had a grant for the program at the time. They feared that I could be killed. My houseboy Kola had once reported me to the soldiers indicating that an Ibo was living in my Flat 101. Vince loves to play tennis and he was good at it. One time we went to play tennis and soldiers came to my Flat looking for me. On our way back I was alerted by a medical student Ajayi [Now Dr. Ajayi]. I had to take refuge at Vincent's bachelor residence. It was then I noticed how good a cook Vince was. One of my favourite dishes was his fried, peeled black-eyed beans. I liked it so much that I was always requesting it. I tried to duplicate it on my own without success.

Although an Ibo from Asaba, Vince spoke fluent Yoruba language and I could not speak a word of it although I taught Science subjects at Eko Boys High School in Lagos upon graduating from the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Enugu Campus. I was constantly in fear for my life during the war and I did everything to hide that fear. The external examiner for my Physiotherapy degree was Professor Marjorie Spence from Canada's University of Manitoba Physiotherapy degree program. During one of my rare one-to-one encounters with her, I expressed my fears and the desire to leave the country possibly to undertake graduate studies in Canada. She conveyed my desire to Professors Grillo and Odeku who began to explore sponsorship options for me. They secured one from the Canadian International Development Agency in Lagos. [The circumstance around my departure from Nigeria during the civil war can be found in the 2006 book: "Canada's Immigrants, Heroes and Countrymen" by Robin A. Arthur and

Sam M. Bayat. Vol II Bloomington Indiana]. At this time Vince expressed to me the desire to pursue a physiotherapy degree program in Canada. I brought this to the attention of Professor Grillo, who like most mentors, pursued the intention. I also indicated to my clinical mentor Dr. Oshin the need to upgrade to a degree as he guided the University of Ibadan program. To my utmost delight, Vince and Peju [Gladys] and later Oshin came to the University of Manitoba when I was undertaking PNF studies at the University of Saskatchewan.



Figure 3 Godwin and Abayomi Oshin 1969

Those were heady days! Vince, Peju and I maintained contact through mutual visits while in Canada. We resumed our mutual jokes and good-naturedness. I remember a party they held for me when I visited them in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Here were Vince, Gladys and their professors having a jolly good time and I could not tell who the Prof. is and who is the student! It was there I met his good friend A.J. Fernando who, like Vince rose to make valuable contribution to the profession. I remember when they visited me in Saskatoon and we all cramped in my one room basement apartment glad to be together once again.

Vincent left an indelible mark on my family when he visited me in Vancouver during his master's degree studies in the United States. My wife and children accused Vince and me of having the same laughing characteristic and demeanor! For years they would say "You are laughing like Vincent". They adored everything about him.

Towards the end of the civil war, just before departing to Canada, Vince accompanied me to my village in Anambra State. My mother and family thought I had been killed at Ibadan following the assassination of Major Fajuyi, the military governor and news reports about the killing of Ibos in Ibadan and Lagos. I had sold my vehicle, an Italian made little Fiat, in preparation for travelling to Canada. Vincent and I drove his Volkswagen from Ibadan to Anambra State crammed with goodies such as 'Peak Milk' and other supplies for my family. His vehicle broke down several times and I was astonished how he became a competent mechanic and able to fix it some of the time. We had a major breakdown before we got to River Niger. There were check points along the way and the war had ended technically but not for some soldiers. As we boarded the ferry to cross River Niger to Onitsha, one of the soldiers accosted us with questions about our identity, destination and work history. Before we could respond due to passenger commotion, the soldier flogged me with "koboko" across my back and Vincent across his lower back repeatedly demanding an answer. Vincent calmly answered their questions as I was frozen in fright. He said to me afterwards, "Goddy, let's just give them what they want". He opened the front of his car to expose cartons of Peak Milk and other commodities. The soldier took as many cartons and commodities he wanted and let us go on our way.

Upon arrival in my village, many of my relatives mistook Vince for Godwin. They ran to him calling him "Nna" in Ibo language and "Ndewo Goddy", and thanking God that he is alive. Later my mother told him that he was welcome to be another son! That is the gesture of a very dear friend who I miss dearly. We joked about this incident for years. I often told him that as the new Vincent, I am ready to inherit his family's wealth at Asaba while he inherits my poverty in Anambra State. Even my wife though we behave alike when he visited me in Vancouver.

In 1972 I returned to the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University as a lecturer at the invitation of my mentor Professor Adesanya Grillo who had established a new faculty and my friend Vince who was already there. Dr. Makunjuola who was a house mate at my clinical residence at UI was also there as a faculty member. He later became V.C. over the years. I confided in Vince that I wanted to pursue further studies in the health of populations having developed a keen interest in Epidemiology while at the University of Saskatchewan. I know that Prof. Grillo wanted me to remain full time faculty as the program develops at Ife. Vince and I came up with a strategy which I took to Professor Grillo who in turn convinced the Vice Chancellor Prof. Oluwasanmi to grant me a leave of absence. I returned to Canada although I was on the faculty list as being on leave of absence for many years.

It is remarkable how Vincent catalysed some of the things I have done professionally. He introduced me to spinal manipulation, a field to which he dedicated his teaching and professional life. I gradually developed an interest in it whenever I had the opportunity. In Canada and the United States, spinal manipulation comes under the professional competence of chiropractors. In 2001, I was appointed a public representative to the Council on Chiropractic Education of Canada and later became the Chair of the Canadian Commission on Accreditation for four years. This gave me the opportunity to review their training and education programs as I travelled frequently to the United States on meetings. I used Prof. Nwuga's book and publications to not only inform myself but also as a measure of clinical reality and competence. I was able to steer the profession towards evidence-based practice and led efforts to revise certain aspects of clinical practice and policy. As a result of my contribution, I was conferred an honorary membership of the national association and inaugural "Builders Plaque" in 2014 by the Provincial Association. Each time I look at the award I will remember Vince as the catalyst that led me to make a contribution to spinal care as an physiotherapist, epidemiologist and administrator. It was Vince who catalysed my interest in manipulative therapy that led to these contributions although I have other professional interests.

In the late 70's and early 80's I used Prof. Nwuga's publications as an instructor in Physical Therapy at the University of Western Ontario and as a Clinical Assistant Professor and head of Medical Rehabilitation at the University of British Columbia Teaching Hospital. I believe many of his protégées have used his wisdom and academic contributions to further progress in various areas of endeavour. I am sure Vince has been as proud as I am to see our students contribute to physiotherapy, international health, epidemiology and health services administration. As a National Universities Commission Scholar and Visiting Professor at the University of Nigeria in 2007/08, I was very delighted at the high regard to which students and faculty in the Department of Medical Rehabilitation held Professor Nwuga. I believe he has left an indelible mark on Physiotherapy profession in Nigeria and internationally.

Early in our relationship, Vince and I used to discuss the beauty and qualities of a very beautiful physiotherapist in the physiotherapy department at the University College Hospital, Ibadan. It was a closely held secret between us. He would say something like "I really like her". I liked her too but did nothing about it. Well, Vince took the giant step and got closer to her. What a choice and what a blessing to him. Gladys has provided Vince the love and caring that everyman should have in a family. I was overjoyed when they married and lived happily ever after. My heart goes out to Gladys who Vince and I call Peju and their children.

I regret missing several chances to visit with Vince and Peju over the years. Once as a consultant for Commonwealth Secretariat and international organization in Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso and

more recently as an Advisor to the Ministry of Health and Sanitation in Sierra Leone in 2011/12. Vince was always in my thoughts. I will miss him dearly.

It is not so much about what one has accomplished, the titles held or conferred, the measure of wealth and prestige, and how long a life has endured that are of critical value but also about the quality of life and the relevance of contribution to life and living that endures in the hearts and minds of those left behind. My dear friend Professor Vincent Nwuga accomplished all of these and will be so remembered.



So long my friend.

Prof. Godwin Eni [Ret]
Vancouver, Canada

Figure 4 Prof. Eni and VC
University of British Columbia



Figure 5 dedicated to the late Prof. Vincent Nwuga

I am dedicating my 2014 inaugural Chiropractic Association “Builders Award” to the memory of my dear friend the Late Professor Vincent Nwuga for his contributions to the education and management of Spine care.