Headache Godfather

Seymour Diamond, M.D.

Charlie Morey

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CHAPTER ONE – You Saved My Life!

In a series of cards and letters that Dr. Seymour Diamond received after announcing his retirement from the Diamond Headache Clinic, there's a phrase that appears frequently and is most often followed by an exclamation point: "You saved my life!"

You might expect that statement in a letter to an emergency-room physician who'd literally helped his patients cheat death when they'd suffered physical trauma from automobile accidents or other violent disasters, but Seymour is a headache doctor. And these expressions of gratitude come from people who suffered from diseases that had no treatment–and little respect as an actual disease–until Dr. Diamond with his pioneering headache-medicine mentors and peers accepted their patients' head pain complaints as legitimate and treatable medical conditions.

“Thanks for saving my life! Until you took my case, I was on a downward spiral. You made all the difference in getting me turned around,” states one letter from a man in Decatur, Illinois.

“Congratulations on all that you have accomplished to help young and old eliminate painful headaches and truly *live life again*. Thank you for giving me my life back!” says another from a woman in Chicago. She goes on to add, “I have known you for over 30 years, and I have seen your determination, passion, compassion, humility, pride, understanding, patience, and love of your work and patients. That was your success, and it continues!”

A woman from Kalamazoo, Michigan says, “I’ll never be able to express my gratitude for your being the famous doctor who *really believed* there were these awful headaches. Thousands must share in the miracles you gave us. I found hope from day one when I first saw you. You patted me on the knee and said, ‘I’ll help you…’ After seeing 19 doctors over a seven-year period, I knew you’d help me. Several days later, I awoke headache free–Wow! How blessed I’ve been to know you as a doctor and a true friend.”

A fellow M.D. from California begins her letter with that same familiar phrase, “Thank you sincerely for saving my life! Your care was exceptional, beyond mere competence. (A UCLA neurologist and a Stanford psychiatrist have been competent, but unsuccessful.) Upon regaining consciousness and clarity, I was curious to parse the elements explaining why you at the Diamond Headache Clinic succeeded so well where others had not. May I offer a few ideas?

1. Your initial assessment was performed by a highest-skilled physician, not a generalist, with speed, thoroughness, precise neurological exam, in-depth history, and rapid-processing through ‘rule-out’ imaging.

2. Diamond Headache Clinic's core is a select team of headache-dedicated experts with very extensive (half a century) clinical experience. The team is unique, well-organized, and 'on the same page'. Leadership is evident.
3. The nursing team members are all fluent in treatment protocols, dosing, side-effects and outcome benchmarks. The RN team was confident, proud of their association with the Diamond Headache Clinic, and expressed loyalty and affection for the DHC medical faculty.
4. A prominent emphasis on non-pharmacological treatment with great respect for (a) brilliant psychological evaluation, (b) salient physical therapy assessment, and (c) classical biofeedback and relaxation rehearsal made very user-friendly.

"As a migraineur for 36 years," she continues, "I happily report no need for a single triptan or opioid in the 15 weeks since discharge from DHC. Diamond Headache Clinic has a master plan that is Standard of Care. If only DHC could clone itself!"

The traits witnessed by this thankful headache sufferer came as no accident or coincidence. In fact, Seymour has put much effort into giving his patients a premium level of care, right down to the finest details, including his greeting when he meets them for the first time. Here's an excerpt from a chapter on the history of headache clinics Seymour wrote for Dr. Frederick G. Freitag's book *Establishing a Headache Center–From Concept to Practice*:

"…I learned to greet all patients with a smile and by shaking their hands. The reason that I discuss this scenario in a chapter on the history of headache clinics is because one of the Diamond Headache Clinic's keys to success was a friendly approach to patients who had been alienated by other physicians. Headache patients are often confronted by a lack of friendliness, indifference, and misconceptions by health care professionals on the nature of headache. The patient with chronic pain,

including headache, is seeking empathy as well as treatment. As a matter of rule, I always try to know something personal about the patient (job, children, hobbies), and try to establish a personal relationship. This openness may produce more insight into the patient's headaches, and facilitate the management of his or her condition. Another feature of a successful practice is to avoid long waiting times at your office, which is unacceptable and creates a barrier between you and your patient. Finally, when dealing with patients, check your ego at the door…"

Seymour's methods have never been secret. In fact, he's published 73 books and nearly 500 papers, alone and with coauthors, and he's delivered hundreds of speaking presentations, including 30 symposia and 34 special lectures.

He's appeared as a headache expert on all the major television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox) in such programs as the *Today Show, Larry King Live*, *48 Hours*, *Early Edition, ABC News with Ted Koppel, Dr. Art Ulene,* and *CBS Morning News*.

He's visited most U.S. states and a number of foreign countries, sharing his treatment knowledge along the way in meetings and discussions. In the early days of his Diamond Headache Clinic, he often invited other doctors to visit his practice to learn his methods. In the heyday of headache as a new medical specialty, the Diamond Headache Clinic reigned supreme.

"I was an energetic guy!" he laughs about it today, but it was his intelligence, education, curiosity, and that energy level, fueled by the problems presented by his patients, that drove him to research and discover new ways to help them manage their headache problems.

Seymour was instrumental in creating the first nonprofit foundation, the National Migraine Foundation, for lay people as well as physicians to benefit from current knowledge of headache treatments. He later

reformed the organization into its current iteration, the National Headache Foundation, with its continued purpose to offer assistance to headache sufferers in need.

He fought battle after battle to get insurance coverage for his patients, particularly those requiring inpatient care at his affiliated hospital units, when the Managed Care program threatened to deny them proper treatment. Ultimately, he formed a committee that created a new Standards of Care document (instructions for doctors to follow in treatment) specifically for headache patients.

Seymour advised the Food and Drug Administration as a headache expert, and he fought with them over things like the drug Elavil (amitriptyline), the most prescribed drug for pain relief, that has FDA approval only as an anti-depressant. When doctors prescribe a drug for anything other than its FDA approved usage, it's called "off-label" use. It's legal, and as Elavil proves, it can also be the most effective treatment.

He lists Academic Posts on his curriculum vitae, both past and current, including a number of professorships, instructor roles, lecturer appearances, and associate professorship positions. Sharing the knowledge has been a passion throughout his tenure as a headache specialist, and in addition to the many patients who write profusely thankful letters to their savior, a significant number of physicians owe Dr. Seymour Diamond a debt of gratitude for helping them understand the complexities of headache treatment.

Seymour will never retire completely. Today, after severing his ties with the clinic he founded, he still heads the National Headache Foundation as Executive Chairman. He's very much a hands-on individual, and at 87 years of age, he still has work to do, adding to his already voluminous contribution to the welfare of headache sufferers. Born to Jewish Ukrainian/Slovakian parents who left their home countries due to

religious persecution, Seymour is a member of the first American-born generation of the Diamond family. He is living proof that the American Dream is attainable through hard work and determination applied intelligently. And we're lucky to have him. Except for a fortunate decision made by his parents in 1924, he might not have been born at all….

CHAPTER TWO – A Child Is Born

It was Rose Diamond's birthday. She was 26 years old, and she was about to enter the hospital for the birth of her second child. A brisk spring breeze off Lake Michigan tugged at her hair, and a chill rippled down her back as she looked up at the imposing face of Chicago's Michael Reese Hospital. She turned to her husband Nathan and smiled up at him, then gasped as a labor pain wracked her small figure. The baby was due.

The baby. She and Nathan had a long and difficult talk when they'd discovered her pregnancy. They had three children already, and they shared their small third-story walk-up apartment with two other adults, her mother Clara Roth and sister Esther. In 1925, only four years before the start of America's Great Depression, it was hard to earn enough money to support themselves, much less another young mouth that would need to be fed, clothed, and educated.

Nathan waited, concern etching his face, until her pain subsided, then smiled back at her, and they approached the last few steps leading to the hospital lobby.

They'd discussed "alternatives" to the birth, hesitating to use the word abortion. But they were Jewish emigrants–he from Kiev, Ukraine and she from Kremnica, Slovakia–having come to the United States as children, and Old World family values were cherished, even here in America.

They would have the child. They would find a way to get by. They had already done more difficult things.

Nathan had left his family in Kiev at the age of 12 to escape the ire of his father's second wife, living with his grandmother until he turned 18. He then traveled to the United States with his cousin's family. They weren't alone. Between 1880 and 1914, two million Jews fled the Russian Empire to escape persecution, and the exodus continued following WWI.

Repeated mob attacks, called pogroms, against Jewish citizens; the conversion of an anti-Semitic novel into a publically published document called "Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion"; and further persecution against Jews motivated Nathan's cousin's family and thousands of others to risk the transatlantic trip to America.

They crossed the Atlantic Ocean by boat, passed through Ellis Island, and eventually made their way to Chicago where they had relatives. Nathan found work during the day and attended English classes at night. He had a salesman's natural gift of gab, and he made a point of removing any hint of an accent, giving his new language a perfect Midwestern twang.

Rose climbed the stone steps embraced in her husband's strong arms to assure a safe ascent. They rested a moment, then opened the hospital doors and stepped inside.

In Chicago, Nathan had met a woman, fallen in love, married, and they'd had two children, Alfred and Ann. But the marriage ultimately failed, and Nathan received custody of the children. Then, when he and Rose were married, they added daughter Idell, now 18 months old.

Nathan was a likable man. He did well in sales, and eventually he'd open a clothing store in Chicago with a partner. The store would do well until the stock market crash of 1929 when they would file for bankruptcy and lose their business. After that, he'd sell insurance for Metropolitan Life, a vocation he'd approach with less enthusiasm than clothing sales but nonetheless provided a good living for his family.

The diminutive couple was directed to follow a nurse who helped Nathan with the paperwork, then showed him to the waiting room as another nurse led Rose away to be prepped for the delivery. She smiled happily. It was her birthday, and she was looking forward to the shared celebrations with her new child.

Rose Roth had traveled to America with her mother Clara Roth and three sisters under somewhat less dire circumstances than Nathan's. Life in Slovakia was hard. Religious intolerance combined with a poor standard of living drove many from their birth country. Following anti-Jewish riots in the early 1880s, and in reaction to the Reception Law (which put Jews on the same level of acceptance as Christians) the Slovak Clerical People's Party was formed to oppose liberalism and specifically limit Jewish influence. For the young mother traveling with four daughters, America seemed to offer the most promise for a bright future.

Nathan paced the waiting room, following in the footsteps of countless expectant fathers before him, worrying and wondering what was happening in the delivery room. Rose, now well sedated in the fashion of the times, wasn't worried about anything. She had been through the experience once before with little Idell, and although she was naturally concerned that the baby be born healthy, the birthing experience itself

wasn't high on her list of concerns. As the time approached, nurses gently eased her legs into the stirrups and encouraged her to push.

Rose, like Nathan, had arrived in the United States as a youngster, passing through Ellis Island and ultimately moving on to Chicago. The 1918 influenza epidemic, which killed more people than the 16 million who had died in WWI, captured teenaged Rose in its grip. Some patients died within hours. Others held on for several days before their lungs filled with fluid, suffocating them. Rose received appropriate treatment and survived, but a resulting viral infection had rendered her nearly deaf, and she wore hearing aids in both ears. Rose was sensitive about the hearing aids and hid them as best she could. The handicap also made her reluctant to join in her husband's business-related social gatherings due to her inability to hear the conversation clearly and reply in a comfortable manner.

But on this night, she was otherwise healthy, happy, married to a man she'd admired even when he'd been married to his first wife, and ready to give birth to their second child together.

As Rose lay exhausted, the sound of a light slap echoed through the otherwise quiet delivery room followed a split-second later by a hearty yowl.

On April 15, 1925, Rose gave birth to a healthy infant whose tiny wristband read "Boy Diamond".

Two of her sisters, following Jewish tradition, had named their first-born male children "Samuel" in memory of their deceased father. Rose felt that another Samuel would be confusing. So, she and Nathan honored their little boy with the name Schmiel Moshe, her father's Hebrew name. But the name that would become well-known in the world of headache medicine would be Seymour Diamond.

CHAPTER THREE – Times Were Different Then

“I’m lucky to be here,” he says 87 years later in his high-rise apartment overlooking Chicago’s famed Lake Shore Drive and beyond it, Lake Michigan. The year is 2012.

Morning light filters in through translucent ceiling-to-floor blinds hung over huge picture windows. It reflects red-gold highlights onto the nearest wall when it strikes the collection of antique microscopes, safely ensconced in a tall, glass display case. Most are made of polished brass, guided through their magnifying motion by knurled knobs and intricate gears. There’s even one crafted from wood for young early-19th century wannabe scientists called a Nuremberg Toy Tripod Microscope. Others date back to the 1600s.

A colorful glass bowl from the Basket Series by sculptor Dale Chihuly refracts another filtered sunbeam into a fan-shaped peacock-tail pattern across the contemporary glass-topped coffee table. A smaller

multicolored glass bowl created by Lino Tagliapietra catches some of the Chihuly-enhanced beams, bouncing them onward into the room.

The back walls of the living room are lined with gray polished wood bookcases and electronic entertainment cabinets, designed by his architect/designer daughter Judi Diamond-Falk, as is the entire half-floor apartment.

Art defines the other walls. A Walt Kuhn oil painting of a nude enhances one spot, and a Ben Shahn pen-and-ink caricature of a man fills a nook. Max Weber's tiny painting "The Conversation" sits astride a miniature easel on a low bookcase among "coffee table" books about other artists. Musicians sound silent strains in a painting by Israeli-French painter Mané Katz. And there's more. Much more. It's a private contemporary art gallery.

Missing are two earlier acquisitions: "Old Fisherman" by George Bellows, a 24" x 19" oil on canvas painting from the early 1900s and "Washerwomen", a smaller oil painting created by New Hope Group impressionist Robert Spencer. Both were donated to Chicago's Terra Museum of Art as a "Gift of Seymour and Elaine Diamond".

Doormen greet visitors in the building's porte cochère three-hundred feet below at street level as a security team watches for any aberration in the newcomers' behavior before electronically opening the heavy wooden gate that leads to the elevators. They also run a pretty good football pool, in which Seymour participates with advice from his youngest daughter, journalist Amy Diamond. Somehow he wins more than she does, a fact that defies explanation.

Middle daughter, Merle, followed her dad's example and became a physician. She works in the family practice as Managing Director of the Diamond Headache Clinic, which Seymour founded in 1974.

This luxurious residence is a far cry from the pedestrian three-story walk-up where Seymour lived his early childhood years.

The conversation pauses, waiting for the raucous clanging of the late 19th century French long case clock–which signals the time with a minor cacophony of whirring gears, clacking levers, and off-key chimes–to cease. One of Seymour's daily chores is to reset the cylinder-shaped weights that power the device. He does so now, pulling downward on the chains that raise the weights.

"Times were hard, and I know my parents talked about alternatives. But I want you to know that when I was older, they explained the situation to me and expressed their regret for having ever considered it.

"It affected the way I look at abortion. I'm not pro-abortion. It might have been my only chance in this world."

He smiles slightly and shrugs, "Times were different then." It's a theme that will recur frequently throughout his long and eventful life.

Immigrants looking for homes in their new country are inclined to gather with others of their own nationality, race or religion. Doing so allows continuation of treasured traditions, a familiar language, national pride, and a willingness to work together to find their way in this strange new country. That's just common sense, but it also creates local geographic separatism when areas are defined by their residents, an Irish neighborhood or a Spanish barrio, for example.

As the localized ethnicities vie for space, conflicts between them arise, as any urban family can verify. When a family moves into a neighborhood that doesn't match its own social characteristics, it's harder still, and the Diamond family lived in an area south of Chicago's Logan Square that was primarily occupied by former residents of Germany, Norway, and Sweden. For a Jewish kid named Seymour from an Eastern European family, conflict was inevitable.

“I had to learn to fight.” he recalls. “It was a particular gang of kids. I was pretty well beaten up. My mom and dad were pretty upset by it. My mom asked my dad to go to the school and find out who they were and ask the school to take care of it.” He pauses in reflection, “I survived it.”

It’s easy to see how a tendency toward tenaciousness would develop under such living conditions, a strength that would carry Seymour through a challenging childhood and into the worlds of medicine and business in coming years. It’s a trait he treasures today and credits with much of his success.

He also learned a more positive version of tenacity from his dad’s work ethic. Nathan sold insurance in a time that was far different from today. He was assigned an area to serve, which included both initial sales and then collection of premiums. The work required long hours, and he typically didn’t arrive home until 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. He supplemented that income by plying his sales techniques in a Maxwell Street clothing store on the weekends. Seymour remembers his dad’s dedication and feels he learned a good lesson in how to succeed simply by trying hard and never giving up.

The online Encyclopedia of Chicago describes Maxwell Street: “For about 100 years, Maxwell Street was one of Chicago’s most unconventional business–and residential–districts. About a mile long and located in the shadow of downtown skyscrapers, it was a place where businesses grew selling anything from shoestrings to expensive clothes.”

The encyclopedia goes on to describe its inhabitants as immigrants from Germany, Ireland, Poland, Bohemia, and “most prominently, Jews, especially those escaping czarist Russia, Poland, and Romania.

“Goods on card tables and blankets competed with goods in sidewalk kiosks and stores. Sunday was its busiest day since the Jews worked on

the Christian Sabbath, when stores were closed in other parts of the city.

“Merchants battled city officials to keep Maxwell Street alive despite its reputation for crime and residential overcrowding. Its eastern section was destroyed in the mid-1950s for the Dan Ryan Expressway. In the 1980s and 1990s, virtually all of the rest was razed for athletic fields for the University of Illinois at Chicago. What remained of the market was moved several blocks to a place with none of the flavor of the old street.”

As a youth, Seymour played baseball, the all-American sport that would become a passion, particularly in following the Chicago White Sox.

“I found some friends in the neighborhood, but not many. I played some baseball. We went to an empty lot, and we’d choose sides and we’d play. I was a fair player. I wasn’t great.”

Greatness would come later, although not in baseball, except when the White Sox won the World Series in 2005 as Seymour turned 80 years old. Their last world championship victory had come in 1917, before he was born, 88 years earlier, and he was proud and relieved that his beloved White Sox had come through with the win at least once during his lifetime! Now he expects, hopefully, for them to do it again. Every season.

Seymour remembers one of his childhood friends with sorrow. Harold (last name withheld) was one of the youngsters who befriended Seymour and gained his affection and respect in return.

“I had one friend that I associated with closely during those years. We continued to be friends even though we didn’t go to the same high school.”

As an adult, Harold would marry and the couple would give birth to an autistic child who they'd ultimately place in an institution, an act that apparently was more than Harold could bear.

"He checked into a hotel room and shot himself. It's just a tragic moment. I often think of him. I met him when I was 8 or 9. We were close friends. Very well read, intelligent…a nice person."

In grade school, Seymour initially experienced problems with reading, and the school advisors recommended a special reading class. Instead, he listened to his father's advice and became a solid lifelong reader without the additional help.

"If you concentrate, pull yourself together and spend time with reading, you'll be okay," Nathan told him, and it proved to be excellent advice, requiring young Seymour to assume responsibility for the success of his own learning process.

Throughout Seymour's youth, father Nathan stood by, always ready to speak up or help out when his son needed a hand, and one of the first things he did following his son's grade school challenges was to arrange for a happier high school experience.

"My dad saw to it. Even though we didn't live in the right district, he obtained a permit for me to attend Roosevelt High School. It was in the Albany Park area, and the population of the school was about 50:50 with Jewish/non-Jewish students. We lived in the district called Kelvin Park where Jewish people were a minority," Seymour recalls. "We didn't have a car at that time. I took the bus there, and it was a longer ride than to the other school. But I managed, and he encouraged me to do that. I didn't have to fight any more."

If high school were to turn things around for young Seymour, it certainly didn't happen on his first day.

“The first day of high school, my parents wanted me to be properly dressed. So they bought me a new pair of fancy knickers and a briefcase, and I went to school that way. And I guess I was a rarity like that.”

Apparently knickers and a briefcase fell far from the fashion norm at Roosevelt High School in the late 1930s. As any high school student can verify, wearing the “wrong” clothes in the transitional teenage world can create a social disaster. And in Seymour’s case, the embarrassment was multiplied manifold when a student article in the school newspaper pointed out his fashion faux pas to all who may have missed it in person. Decades later, he still remembers the feeling with sadness: “It wasn’t a nice thing and it really bothered me.”

It was also in high school that Seymour became involved with a group of students whose influence would negatively affect his life later on.

“I associated with a group who were very bright. And at the time, I thought they were much brighter than I would ever be. And I felt very inferior,” he remembers. “We had lunch every day. They were all Jewish. They were the people who believed in Socialism and Communism at that time. Many of the Russian immigrants, even though they came over because of distress, believed in Socialistic and Communistic ideas. It was probably inherent from their parents.”

He set out to become one of their gang, adopting their leftist beliefs, and reading publications like *Friends of the USSR* and *New Republic*.

“High school was very clannish. The only club I had was this group of what I thought were super-intellectuals. I’ve changed my mind since that time. Most of them didn’t turn out very well. None of them, except perhaps one, ever achieved success in the world.”

Seymour's friends and politics changed dramatically as he matured, but that brush with "un-Americanism" in high school would return to haunt him as he applied for entrance into college.

Other high school activities included music, and Seymour learned to play the clarinet. Although he's never thought of himself as a musician and didn't continue his pursuit of the instrument, he did develop a taste for classical music during his teenage years.

It was also at Roosevelt High that Seymour received praise and encouragement from an English teacher, Ms. Moser.

"I had a teacher in my Junior and Senior years who liked the way I wrote and really encouraged me to write. She entered me in a citywide writing contest where I won."

Ms. Moser apparently recognized Seymour's potential, and although he wouldn't follow the path to journalism, her support and encouragement gave him a critical boost in confidence when he needed it.