
June 2024

Sapere Aude – Dare to be Wise: Mohammad R. Torabi

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Recommended Citation

Torabi, Mohammad (2024) "Sapere Aude – Dare to be Wise: Mohammad R. Torabi," *Health Behavior Research*: Vol. 7: No. 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2572-1836.1276>

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Abstract

Sapere Aude – Dare to Be Wise is a unique editorial conversational interview-type feature. It is an attempt to deep dive into an Academy members' background, formative experience, and education – specifically, to extract factors that contributed to their development and evolution as a professional, as well as their success as a prominent researcher in the health behavior arena. Every Academy member selected has a different story to tell and numerous models for success will emerge from this exploration of the membership.

Keywords

Sapere Aude

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CHILDHOOD

Full name: Mohammad Rahim Torabi

Tell me about where you were born and how you grew up.

I was born in an ancient and small city in the western part of Iran known as Nahavand, in the Province of Hamadan. The city had a population of around 35,000 and was an agricultural town. Feudalism was the overarching local economic, social, and political system. Regardless, people had a thirst for poetry, outdoor activities, and love for humor and fun. Nahavand is also known for some of the most beautiful hand-woven Persian rugs. Nahavand's rugs have their own distinctive designs and colors that are easily identified by professionals.

There were small extraordinarily wealthy families and some middle-class families; additionally, there were lower middle class, and poor families. My family belonged to the lowest category. So, I was born in a financially poor but culturally and spiritually rich family. I was the middle of five living brothers and sisters. Because there was no governmental social security, my widowed grandmother also lived with us until she passed away when I was a university student. By the time my siblings and I were born, my father – because of not having any serious job and his addiction to opium – had sold most of the property he had inherited; consequently, we were really a poor family. Due to his addiction, the patriarchal culture of the country, and being the only son survived of 16 siblings, he was an authoritative head of family. He sometime verbally and physically abused my mother and the rest of us. I hold no ill feelings towards him because I realize that addiction is a disease, and he felt that his way was *the way* to oversee his family. To be fair, whenever he was sober, and in a good mood, he was a playful and loving father. Regardless of these issues with my father, he was protective of us, and I have always

loved him. Nevertheless, I have tried hard to forget those memories of abuse and have learned never to follow in his path!

My mother worked extremely hard to keep the family going, making sure we went to school, even with a minimum of nutrition and used clothing that she managed to get from cousins or other relatives. Sometime my mother asked neighbors or strangers for any leftover bread and pretended it was for our outdoor dog. Indeed, it was for us. As a part of our cultural heritage, Iranians are immensely proud people, and even if they are poor, they pretend that they are all right. There is a Persian idiom that clearly describes Persian's pride. "Ba Sili Soorat Sorkh Kardeh" which means you blushed with the slap on the face!

Some of these breads were moldy, or there were teeth marks on them. After school, sometimes we used to splash a few drops of water on it to make the bread more edible. We had no running water, no refrigerator, and no electricity. Our mother constantly encouraged us to take our education seriously. We had an oil lamp that did not provide adequate lighting at night for us to study and do our homework. Meanwhile there was a competition among siblings about who would excel best in academic work. This sense of competition was consistent with the cultural norm then. Because of the inadequate light, and the number of people in one room, after our dinner and regardless of the outside temperature, I would take my books to the street where there were electric poles and I would study for hours, and around midnight head home and crawl under the blanket. This was my nightly routine during the academic year.

What did your parents do for a living?

My father was a low-key farmer who had a garden during the summer from which fruits were dried, i.e., potatoes and beans, which were saved for our winter meals so my mother could make warm food for us to eat when we came home from school. Breakfast consisted of bread and hot tea. For lunch, my mother cooked dried legumes mixed with other dried vegetables that

were saved from the summer garden. During break times, public schools might offer hot milk to children, and we took advantage of that. My mother was a homemaker who took care of all six of us, including our father.

What about your education?

At the time, the Iranian educational system was modeled after the British system but with much lower quality in every regard. The curriculum was heavily science-oriented; art and music were nonexistent. We had six years of elementary school, three years of basic high school, and during the second three years of high school, we had to select one of the three majors: Natural Science, Mathematics, or Literature. I majored in Natural Science.

What were your interests in high school?

My main education interests were to earn good grades and to earn the respect of my peers/teachers. Other interest areas were reading 13th century Persian poems from Rumi, Hafez, Saadi, and other poets. Additional interest was and continues today to be my love for the family and nature.

EDUCATION

Tell me about your experiences getting your undergraduate degree. (i.e., BA/BS, undergraduate degree, college).

When I was completing my high school program, I desperately wanted to get out of poverty, and the only way for me to do so was to get admitted to the best university in Iran – the University of Tehran. I graduated from high school with almost a perfect GPA, and then took the national exam required for admission to the Iranian universities. Fortunately, I was admitted to the University of Tehran, the oldest and most prestigious university in the country. I was the first one in my family and among all my relatives to have been admitted to a university. Because this university was founded by Reza Shah, the founding father

of the Pahlavi Dynasty, I received a full scholarship for my Bachelor of Science degree. Consequently, I was able financially to be a little help to my parents. I did not take this educational opportunity for granted – to the contrary, I took it very seriously. I stayed at a beautiful dormitory located in the northern part of Tehran with a spectacular view of the mountains, tasty food, a good library, and other amenities. Because I was remarkably close to my family, especially my mother and younger brother, I used to get homesick and managed to visit them at every opportunity I got.

What inspired you to get your master's degree?

I knew that with a Bachelor of Science degree, I could not get the kind of job I wanted to have, so I decided to pursue a graduate degree. To do that, I had to be admitted to the same university for the academic challenge, as well as for reasons of financial relevance as well as prestige. My sensitive personality did not match with dealing with patients, as a medical doctor, so pursuing a public health degree was my next best option. The University of Tehran had a well-established and internationally respected school of public health, so I aimed to be accepted for the MSPH degree. After taking written and oral exams, my dream came true, and I was a member of a cohort of 12 students admitted into the Department of Health Education and Promotion in the school of public health. All my professors had doctoral degrees from some of the most prestigious universities in the United States (U.S.) and Europe. In addition to challenging coursework, we were required to do an internship in remote parts of Iran, followed by fulfilling a data-based master's thesis.

Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?

Yes, I was fortunate enough to have had several outstanding professors who not only challenged me academically, but also taught me by example the value of humility, hard work, ethical conduct, and caring for others. One professor worth

mentioning had adopted two children with major disabilities, whereas he could have instead, had two healthy children from an orphanage or had children of his own. Another professor sometimes used a mask to cover his identity and used to take food to the old and disabled prostitutes in a brothel in the evening (prostitution at a governmental monitored location was legal then). My dissertation advisor was a perfectionist and expected nothing less from his mentees which sometimes made it stressful for me. However, I learned from him that quality outputs were far more important than just quantity.

What lessons would you say you learned from them that have influenced your educational and professional development?

I learned from them the value of discovery, hard work, being respectful, challenging my students, being involved in the greater community, caring for others, and giving that extra little bit extra in research, service, and teaching.

Now tell me about your doctorate work. Again, what inspired you to go on, instead of getting a job out of your master's degree (i.e., doctorate, college).

After, I successfully defended my master's thesis, I fell in love with the idea of doing research, seeking answers to challenging questions, generating new ideas, and sharing my findings orally or through publications. As a master's student at the University of Tehran, I graduated as a class valedictorian which meant I could have a full scholarship to pursue my PhD degree anywhere in the world if the university met the ambitious standards of the Iranian Ministry of Higher Education. For the first time in my life, an enormous opportunity along with my burning desire for pursuing a research career came together. After consulting with my mentors/professors, I narrowed it down either to applying to PhD programs in the United Kingdom or in the U.S. Then, I visited the Iran Ministry of Higher Education and sought their

advice. The lady who was a senior academic advisor spoke in such a motherly tone, and yet emphatically, that one should apply to universities in the U.S. So, the decision was made, and I decided to apply to those universities from which either my professors or the senior Iranian governmental leaders had graduate degrees. I applied to four Big Ten universities and my first admission came from Purdue University, signed by John R. Seffrin, PhD. As fate would have it, he eventually became my mentor, and best friend.

In April 1978 I arrived on the campus of Purdue University with a full scholarship but not knowing a soul. After taking an English course which was required for foreign students, I enrolled in PhD courses for the fall semester. I was homesick and I struggled with the English language and the challenging coursework. but because of my full scholarship, I was financially secure. As a foreign student, I was required to be a full-time student. Because of my strong quantitative background, I took statistics among other health courses and "aced" it. Despite all the language and cultural barriers, I did well academically. At the end of the first year of my PhD program, the Iranian government at the time required a progress report of the scholarship recipient from the head of the respective academic unit. Professor Dale Hanson was the Chair of the unit, and he graciously wrote the following statement in a letter to the Iranian Embassy:

"They say that growth is often painful . . . seeds tear open as a new plant is born, and even healing wounds itch in a painful way. But what other real choice is there? Growth evidences life; we either grow or decline. To become more tomorrow than you were today an achievable goal, worthy of your dedication and sacrifice."

By the end of the semester, a revolution had started in Iran, and things were getting worse by the day. By the start of the second academic year the revolution sadly succeeded, and soon after, the new government discontinued my scholarship. True hardship began for my second

academic year. I had no financial support, Iran was in turmoil, and legally, I had to be a full-time student; I was not allowed to work off campus. So, I had no alternative but to forge ahead. It reached the point that I could not pay for the dormitory. There was housing for international students at the International Center. I asked if they could let me work and have a room. After an interview, I was selected as the house manager. It was an old building with about twelve tenants and my job was to run the house and be responsible for it; in return, I would have a free room. It was not a desirable place, an old building with cockroaches all over. There was a common shower for everyone, and a kitchen where the international students could cook and eat, and every room was equipped with a sink.

I started working hourly on campus to pay for my food, and the Purdue Office of International Programs paid for my tuition for that year. Making my story short, I did everything legal and ethical to survive, and academically excel. The only thing I could find was washing dishes on campus. My pride did not allow me to put food on the students' trays for fear that I would be recognized by others. I asked my supervisors to assign me in the back of the kitchen washing pots and pans, the hardest job. Still, I took this hourly dishwashing job seriously. For my effort, I was awarded a wage increase of five cents per hour. Washing dishes was not enough for me to pay the bills, so I inquired about hourly jobs at the University Audio-Visual Center. My job was to carry on my shoulder a heavy projector during some of the coldest and snowiest days in West Lafayette, Indiana, set it up, and stay through the length of the movie and return the projector to the Center. This service was essential for the professors of the Film Studies and Media program. During this trying time for me, several radical opportunistic students in Iran had taken over the U.S. Embassy and taken 52 Americans hostage. On the news every night was the story about the Americans held hostage. In fact, the *Nightline* program on the ABC network started with the title of Americans Held Hostage, day one all the way to day 444. Sadly, this nightly program, along with many other major news

networks did NOT distinguish between the Iranian people, and the Iranian government. Consequently, this sad and despicable event created enormous difficulty for Iranian students in the U.S. Even some Iranian-looking students who happened to be Indian had been beaten up in town. I was told that the campus police had a contingency plan to evacuate Iranian students in case things got out of control. Complicating the situation further, there was a minority of opportunistic Iranian students in the U.S. who were hoping to gain some privileges from the new regime in Iran, subsequently taking advantage of America's First Amendment and marched in the streets of Washington D.C. in support of the hostage takers in Iran. This vocal minority of Iranian students in America did not like people like me.

Fortunately, by the beginning of my third academic year I had improved my communication skill and was awarded a graduate teaching assistantship by the academic unit that covered my tuition and monthly stipend. My major professor, Dr. Hal Veenker, understood my circumstance, and was most supportive of me. He wanted me to graduate on time yet, was surprised that I wanted to take more advanced statistics and research methods courses beyond my course prescription requirements. In April of 1982, I successfully defended my dissertation, and graduated from Purdue University. Because I had no family members in the U.S., my major professor, Hall Veenker, and his wife, Betty Veenker, served as my family and attended the commencement ceremony.

What factor or set of actors contributed to your pursuing an academic career and becoming a researcher?

After earning my PhD degree, I accepted a two-year postdoctoral position at Indiana University working with Dr. John Seffrin as my advisor/mentor and earned my MPH degree. My postdoctoral program was focused on taking advanced statistics, research methods coursework, and qualitative work with a pioneer in the field of naturalistic evaluation, Professor

Egon Guba. During these two years, I authored or co-authored research articles and special monographs. My BS, MSPH, and PhD degrees all required thesis or dissertation. Consequently, my personal interest in research, extensive research-oriented coursework, and my academic requirements prepared me for an academic career at Carnegie Research 1 institutions.

Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?

Absolutely yes. I was lucky enough that my path crossed with several extraordinary professors/mentors in the U.S. and in Iran. To mention a few among many – Dr. Seffrin (Indiana University) Dr. Veenker, Dr. Ismail, Dr. Hicks (Purdue University), Dr. Guba (Indiana University), and Dr. Soraya and Dr. Shafee (University of Tehran) – among others. I am eternally grateful for their guidance, understanding and support. I am a true believer that my mentors made a difference in my academic career.

What lessons would you say you learned from them that have influenced your educational and professional development?

They not only “talked the talk,” but also, “walked the walk.” Just observing them made them role models for me. Caring, hardworking, dedication to advancing the profession, being respectful, and having a strong work ethic were a few of the important lessons I learned from them. Students are our future, and mentoring, and preparing them to carry on the torch is a fundamental responsibility we have as faculty.

Tell me about the relationship you had with your major advisor.

My major professor, Dr. Hal Veenker was a traditional academic advisor, profoundly serious, academically demanding, not pretentious, but deep down, a very caring individual. He was a perfectionist and expected nothing less of his PhD students. Ironically, for my other mentor,

Dr. Seffrin, I was his first PhD student, *and I was his last*. Even after I was a tenured full professor, and the head of a major Health Science Department in the nation, I never allowed myself to call my major professor by his first name.

Tell me about what you studied as a student, and what led you down that path.

For me, it was not what I studied, but what I experienced that drew me to public health, and health behavior research in particular. This was because of one of my saddest childhood memories that truly shows the impact of public health. Because of my father’s addiction, I first-hand experienced the negative impact of drug use as well as the high infant mortality rate in Iran. The high infant mortality rate affected my own family, as my mother lost two babies by the age of six months. Because of the lack of access to decent healthcare, and for financial reasons in a family like ours, we were drawn to superstitious folk remedies. I remember as an almost ten-year-old boy, my mother took a dying infant (my little brother) to a shrine of supposedly an offspring of an imam (Religious Saint) to leave him on the cold hard rock floor, hoping/praying that the dead person would heal the baby. The infant passed away the next day and left my mother grieving for a long time. What else one can expect when poverty, lack of education, corrupt clergies, and superstitions all come together? Observing all these real-life experiences, at first, I thought of pursuing medicine, but based on my own personality, I could not deal with sick people. I have utmost respect for medical doctors who spend a great deal of effort addressing the health and well-being of their patients. My earlier visits to relatives in hospitals were not pleasant either. I first-hand noticed how the doctors and nurses were trying to communicate to the patients and their loved ones that there was no hope, and they were terminally ill. Additionally, that was the longest evening for me when I went home, thinking about the patients, loved ones, and relatives and how the doctors and nurses communicated with dying patients and their

families. That night, I was up all night, first admiring the doctors and other healthcare providers and second, feeling tremendously sad for those that were dying as well as for their survivors.

That was the turning point for me and left me without interest to pursue medicine. The other reason was I grew up in a third-world country where the quality of healthcare services was below minimum standards for low middle class, and poor people. High quality healthcare was available to those who could afford it but was out of reach for ordinary people. Most people could not afford access to quality healthcare. Later, as I was doing an internship in Iranian villages, I first-hand observed people dying needlessly because of the non-availability of vaccines, clean water, and little access to any serious health clinic. At this age, I realized while providing medical care for this vast number of people is enormously expensive, something could be done, like building public health infrastructures which would be far less expensive. I realized there was no competition between public health and medicine. In fact, I realized early on that these professions are complementary. Public health can prevent disease, promote health, and enhance the quality of lives. However, everyone at a certain point in their life is going to need a medical doctor, clinician, and hospitalization. If public health professionals do their job properly, then healthcare providers will not be overwhelmed with some of the most preventable diseases, so they spend more quality time with patients that need greater attention.

I became fascinated with public health, especially for third-world countries because of economic reasons; public health is simply much more affordable. As a Persian saying goes – “prevention is the ultimate cure.” That is what public health is all about.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Let’s move beyond your education time and talk about your career.

After earning my PhD, I had decided that I wanted to be a research professor. Besides, I had to have a university job, or I had to leave the country because I was on a student visa. I applied for more than 50 faculty positions all over the country. First, I was invited for a job interview in a small university. After meeting with the search committee, they took me to visit the dean of the school. As he was glancing through my CV, and as soon as I opened my mouth, he said you are a foreigner from Iran – to which I said “yes.” He said I would not hire a foreigner, especially one from Iran, and that was the end of my interview. Fast forward to later, when I was an established researcher, and tenured faculty at Indiana University, the same dean contacted me and needed my advice on a research project for his sabbatical leave without recognizing that I was the one who he had mistreated! I decided to help him; when we met in person, he recognized me. I had two other similar job interviews, resulting in more humiliation. One interview was in a small teaching institution on the east coast. I remember the chair of the search committee who happened to be a retired dentist. During lunch at the campus cafeteria, he pointed to his shoes and said to me – “You know, my shoes are made in the U.S.A., my car is made in America, and so on. I could not connect the dots until later. He basically was saying that he was not going to support a foreign applicant for the job! That is when I decided to pursue the postdoctoral position which helped me hone my research skills and enabled me to publish in major journals. By then, various universities were recruiting me, and I accepted the offer of the flagship campus of Indiana University. The lessons I learned from these interviews were valuable. When I became Department Chair, and later, the Dean, I instructed all the search committees that I had appointed to treat faculty applicants as guests with utmost respect. Some of the applicants who were not the best match for our needs, and were not offered the jobs, nevertheless later became good friends and colleagues!

What has been your proudest research or other professional accomplishment to date?

In over the 70-year history of our school, I was the first faculty member named Chancellor's Professor and I joined the Indiana University Alliance of Named and Distinguished Professors. Also, being granted an early tenure and promotion at a Big Ten university was another point of pride. These accomplishments were due to the quality of my sustained research productivity, mentoring graduate students, and serving our profession at national and international levels.

Were there any projects or studies you thought would lead to something interesting that just didn't pan out?

Yes, we did a research project studying factors affecting happiness for college students. Sadly, I did not have enough time to publish it. By the time I had some free time to work on it, the data were too old.

Tell me about your philosophy that guides your research chain of inquiry and your other academic pursuits?

Soul searching and learning about my strength related to research areas (finding my niche) and merging it with existing gaps in the body of literature as well as publishing impactful work have been my research philosophy. In my judgment, sometimes there is a difference between impactful publications, and publishing in high impact factor journals. With respect to other academic pursuits like assuming leadership, my philosophy has been doing the right things regardless of any consequences for me and using my heart and head in making any serious decisions.

Inasmuch as you have been successful in disseminating your research, what advice do you have for young professionals who struggle?

Do not be afraid of rejections whether from journal editors or funding agencies. Ask them for feedback. Learn from your rejections, incorporate their suggestions, resubmit, do not give up, and move on. Ironically, we can learn much more from our failures than our successes! I would suggest focusing on quality and impactful publications. And when your name appeared as an author or co-author, it better be something that you would be proud of ten or 20 years down the road. Once it is published, your name is associated with it for perpetuity.

What single best piece of advice would you pass along to a new investigator or student researcher-in-training today?

Identify the best mentor who is willing to guide you, and then listen, and follow his/her advice. Having a great mentor is necessary but not sufficient, you must also be a great mentee as well.

Balance personal life and professional career. Life is too short, do not miss the opportunity of taking the time to smell the roses!

Describe the most courageous thing you have had to do in your academic career—perhaps something that put you at risk for the sake of standing up for a principle.

As a new PhD degree recipient, I was in a job interview when the chair of the Search Committee tried hard to impress his colleagues with his profound knowledge of statistics. Unfortunately, he was not a good statistician and I corrected him. Needless to say, it cost me the job that I desperately needed to have then. And yet, thank goodness I did not get that job because I could have been stuck with teaching five different courses per semester and no expectation for research. There was another event too – we had a president of an international professional organization for which I served as a board member. He respected me, and often asked me for advice. In one of our board's meetings, he publicly admonished a female international board member who was not fluent in English. I

had to stand up to his bullying behaviors. That was the end of his courteous relationship with me.

When your professional career ends, how would you like to be remembered?

The beauty of an academic career is that you retire from a job but not from your profession. So, you can continue at your pace with greater flexibility. Professionally speaking, when all ends, I would like to be remembered as a professional who used his both heart and head in making any major decision. I believe in the eternal words of Rumi, Persian Poet of the 13th century: “The only lasting beauty is the beauty of the heart.”

Professionals in any field have been known to say there is a price for success. To what extent has that been your experience in the academic world?

In my case, it has been true. I paid a heavy price for where I am today. I used to work seven days a week, and at least ten hours per day. Nothing came to me easily, and frankly, I sacrificed some family time to be academically successful. Conducting research, taking care of students, and contributing to professional organizations all required much time and energy. In my judgment, there is no substitute for arduous work. However, no matter how much you love your academic career, working too hard creates enormous stress which is a major health risk factor!

LIFE OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA

Who are the people outside of your professional world who have impacted your life and what have some of those impacts been?

A number of people have profoundly touched my life. I have been lucky enough to have an incredibly supportive family here in the U.S. Without their love and support, I would not have been where I am today. Furthermore, I must thank my mother who instilled in her children the

value of education, hard work, and ethical conduct. Without having any college degree, she truly educated us about how to lead our lives. My mother constantly reminded her children about the importance of humility. Second, my father taught us the value of spirituality, but not religiosity. Third, my older sister taught me about love. She did not believe in love at first sight, she reminded me over and over about the beauty on the inside, and not necessarily, in appearance. She taught me that love does not happen overnight, but it is a phenomenon that evolves.

What are some leisure time activities for which you have a passion?

Spending time with my family, hiking, biking, swimming, reading, writing, listening to classical music, following international news, fine dining, staying in touch with my friends, traveling to exotic places, engaging in aerobic exercise and resistance training, and many others.

If you could spend an evening with anyone, living or dead, contemporary character or historical figure, who would it be and what would you want to talk about?

This is a difficult one for me to answer because there are multiple historical characters, I wish I had the opportunity to interact. If I must choose one, it must be Omar Khayyam, a Persian astronomer, poet, mathematician, and scientist whose Robayyats (poems) have been translated in over 30 languages. He was born on May 18, 1048. He was a true doctor of philosophy, and truly personified what a PhD degree is all about which is connecting poetry to science, to the universe, to the arts, and to the purpose of life. I would love to learn from him how ten centuries ago he discovered the purpose of life and how he got his depth and breadth of knowledge. Did he genuinely enjoy his life without worrying about what comes next? It would have been a long, inspiring, and fascinating conversation for me.

If you weren't doing what you are doing career-wise, what would you be doing?

I love nature, and I would have been an agriculturist. In that profession, I could have served starving children, served humanity, and nourished my soul with natural beauty.

Which three books outside of academia would you recommend for others to read and why?

First, I recommend *Fascism: A Warning*, by Madelene Albright. This is an insightful, and realistic reading about how fascism can take a root in a country, and eventually everyone pays the price and a small elite represses the whole nation. It is truly an eye-opening book which teaches us not to take our freedom for granted.

The second book for me is *The Essential Rumi*, Persian poet of 13th century, translated by Coleman Barks. Rumi's poems have been translated in numerous languages. Rumi was truly a genius of all time, and through love, and spirituality, he teaches about everything which is important in life, and universe.

The third is *Robayyat* by Omar Khayyam. His poems have been translated in more than 30 languages. Some of his poems have been sung by famous singers in various middle eastern countries. His poems, known as Robayyat have given true and realistic view of life and its purpose.

Share something about yourself that you believe is misunderstood by others.

This is an interesting question! Because of my first name, and my country of origin, sometimes I feel that I am viewed by those who do not know me as a very socially conservative person. The truth is that I am a social progressive.

Editor's note.

Dr. Torabi joined as the 23rd founding member on May 20, 1997. He served as the fourth president (2004-2005), was named a Fellow, and a received the Lifetime Achievement Award (2024).

Elbert D. Glover and Robert J. McDermott are the Feature Editors of *Sapere Aude*.