

Remembering Stanley Insler
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The more I think about Stanley's absence, the more dislocated I feel. He was such a presence and such a part of our lives that even now, even long after I was his student—not that I ever did stop being his student—there is a frustrating emptiness. I had heard about him when I first arrived in New Haven (this was 1970). I was entering the Religious Studies program, and one of my prospective teachers in that department warned me that Religious Studies students found his Sanskrit course daunting. Another, after I told him that I wanted to study Sanskrit and Indian religion, told me that I couldn't do that at Yale and recommended I start Japanese instead. And indeed, as Stephanie has described, our first encounter with Stanley did leave some questions when he swept in on the first day of class, announced that we would start next time, and swept out again.

When the course did get underway, Stanley turned out to be a splendid teacher, crystalline in his thinking and explanation. He didn't care to repeat himself, as I recall, which in my case led to notes that were paginated and indexed to try to prevent backsliding. Yet he was also patient with us as beginners. In my notes, I wrote down questions that I intended to ask in class the next day. Even though, as I look at them now, I recognize just how truly appalling they were, I don't remember Stanley becoming exasperated or unwilling to answer even the most deeply uninformed of them. He was also exacting in class, and over the years of our Sanskrit courses with him, perhaps the strongest scholarly impress he left on me was the value he placed on careful analysis, close reading, and independent evaluation of a text.

By the second and third year, we had begun to finish class and then to go off for coffee at Hungry Charlie's, which once graced York Street, or to other spots when that one closed. It was in these conversations that we began to see the range of Stanley's interests unfold: Stephanie and I wrote about this before, but just to give an idea, in them Barlach sculpture bumped into Chippendale furniture, which sat beside aspic recipes, which was accompanied by French classical music, which might lead into stories of Sanskritists now and then, here and there, admired and—even more entertainingly—not. He became a part of us, or so I would like to think. He did appear in dreams. Once when I was coming up on my qualifying exams, I dreamt Stanley and his colleague Warren Cowgill sat down together to play four-hand piano. When they finished, Stanley turned to me and asked how this piece was like the Ṛgvedic Ādityas, the gods on whom I intended to write my dissertation. I awoke in a panic, unable to recall either the piece or at that moment, much about the Ṛgveda at all.

Later, but before I left New Haven, I completed a draft of my dissertation. Stanley then sat down with me and read my text back to me, sentence by excruciating sentence, word by painful word, accompanied by a steady stream of his cigarette smoke. Frequently there would be pregnant pauses, and then he would explain what I needed to do or what I shouldn't have done or both. Then he would draw a long red line next to offending passages and write "fix" in the margin. My task was to get home quickly before I forgot just exactly what I was supposed to fix and how I should go about fixing it. At the end of this first dissertation iteration, there were more red-lined than unmarked margins, but eventually, rewrites later, we got me through.

We saw less of one another after I left for points west and south. I visited New Haven, Bill and Stanley came to see me, and of course we talked on the phone. But it was the AOS that really kept us in touch. There was never enough time to talk at the meetings, but there were no awkward moments when we did, as if we were just picking up where we left off. As always, Stanley talked about whatever interested him at the time and told stories about the people he knew and the places he had gone. He once said that he often didn't feel nearly as buoyant and lively as he seemed but that he wanted to cheer up other people. The AOS and much else are not the same without him. All of us—his students, colleagues, and friends—were lucky to have spent so many years with Stanley. I wish that we all would have had more.