

Stanley Memorial text

I still vividly remember my first encounter with Stanley, though it happened almost 50 years ago. It was my first day of graduate school, my first graduate class. I had come to Yale in part because somebody had told me that Yale had a great Sanskritist. I now have no idea what I then thought a great Sanskritist might be like -- I was just coming out of college, with no notion of what graduate training and scholarship actually were, much less Sanskritists -- but in any case, whatever I might have expected it wasn't the puckish figure who popped his head in the door of that little classroom on the 2nd floor of HGS -- I'm surprised I don't remember the number -- and said, "I just got back from Europe. I can't meet today -- I'll see you on Monday." Joel was in that class too, and I certainly had no idea that two of the most formative and enduring relationships of my adult life had their beginnings at that moment.

We all lived in each other's pockets at Yale in those days -- lunch in Commons every day with much of the Linguistics Dept. and — generally just Stanley, Joel, and me — coffee in mid-afternoon, at Hungry Charlie's or, later, Mister Donut. I can't imagine how we got any work done or what we talked about, day after day -- but we were initiated into the institutional history of Yale linguistics and of international Indology, including the ancient gossip pertaining to both. And there were the set pieces -- for example, Stanley's unforgettable imitation of badly dubbed Hercules movies, which we begged him for from time to time. The most reliable sign of spring in dreary New Haven was the annual lunchtime discussion of the difference between jonquil and narcissus, which, in the pre-smart-phone era, required a detour into Sterling on the way back to HGS. We also made an annual pilgrimage to Whitney's grave in the Grove St. Cemetery -- in May, as I recall, because we'd put lilies of the valley on the grave.

Every student takes different things away from a charismatic teacher, and I can only sketch a little of what I took. Stanley had no fear and no filter -- this is not always a good thing for interpersonal relations, but it's a fine set of traits for a scholar. He taught us to approach the texts directly -- unburdened by the dead hand of tradition, either ancient and indigenous or modern and Western, unmediated by received ideas or the straitjacket of commentary that sometimes seems to constrict Indological research. We should be as imaginative and iconoclastic as possible -- as long as we could support what we came up with with all relevant evidence and meticulous argument. He modeled this for us in his own scholarship and forced us, sometimes painfully, into the same mold. He was exacting and he could be exasperating -- as I think anyone who wrote a dissertation under his direction will attest -- or anyone who tangled with him over matters of American Oriental Society policy. But at least for me he left such an inescapable stamp on the way that I approach scholarship that, along with Warren Cowgill, he remains, in a twist on the Upaniṣadic term, my Inner Controller, shaping the ways I approach problems and devise solutions. But he also modeled the sheer exuberant fun of deep engagement with the text and the joy of

slowly coming to think that you now understand something that no one else has for the past three thousand years. I remember his telling us once that when he was working really really hard on the Gāthās his brain got so hot that he could feel the heat on the top of his head -- physiologically unlikely, I think, but it contains a deeper truth.

I still cannot imagine a world in which I can't send Stanley my latest work and wait—and wait—tremuously for his opinion—or at a conference sneak off for a drink (and in his case a smoke) to dish about our companions. It is a much grayer world.