

Stanley Insler

Remarks delivered at the Service of Remembrance and Celebration of His Life
The Quinnipiack Club, New Haven, CT — April 13, 2019

Take a few seconds now to picture your first encounter with Stanley. I doubt there's anyone here who doesn't remember it, for no one else was so consistently, colorfully, flamboyantly memorable. In my case, the scene is a linguistics party in a lovely wood-paneled room in HGS. Before meeting him, I was confident I was going to be a linguist. After meeting him, I remained confident, but there was a new burden: I didn't wish any longer to be just a linguist; I wished to be Stanley — though how on earth was that going to happen? In a single hour he'd made clear to me that although I knew nothing, he was going to teach me Sanskrit, he'd introduced me to Sir Aurel Stein and some of the principles behind irreversible binomials, he'd done his Tallulah Bankhead imitation, and he'd sat down at the piano across from the drinks table and played with joyful ease.

In the years that followed, he became a second father to me, a friend of my actual father and mother, and an intimate of my closest friends at Yale and beyond. It is a truism at an event of this kind to say that it is difficult to think of a Stanley-less world, but I tell you from the bottom of my sad heart that I cannot imagine what my undergraduate years would have been like without him, and without Bill, for I hung onto his every word, spoken and written alike. He taught with the chalk-flying pizzazz of one possessed, just a few steps from that fabulously messy, smoke-filled double office of his. And I spent hours every day — I really did: *hours, every day* — in that fabulously messy, smoke-filled double office, where he entranced me with stories of so many colleagues, dead and alive: the brilliant and loony late Indo-Iranist Paul Tedesco, for example, his predecessor in the Salisbury chair, and the brilliant and less-loony Anna Morpurgo Davies, professor of comparative philology at Oxford, with whom I went on to study after college at his encouragement and of whom he was jealous, not at all secretly, because she was two days older than he was. He made me goggle-eyed with talk about the musical scene in New York in the 1950s and his friends Leonard Bernstein and John Browning, and I would sit hunched over the *Rig Veda*, nearly immobile in one of his uncomfortable chairs, in order to spend time with him as he leapt about, pulling books off shelves and articles from filing cabinets and then tossing them carelessly, and sometimes unsuccessfully, onto the nearest of the dozens of ominous piles of paper learning that covered nearly every surface. I memorized his offprints; shared his delight in “shattered heads,” a subject much on his mind when I first got to know him; and ultimately disobeyed him, perhaps not entirely to his disappointment, when he told me not to write about pronouns because, he said, Yalies who pursued their secrets were cursed.

Our conversations took place at all times of day and ran frequently late into the night. Often we were in HGS, but sometimes we were living it up at Mory's or slumming it in Commons or drinking gin with Fritz and Laura Liebert in their retirement apartment or dining, once in a while in the company of Jay Jasanoff or Ruth Barcan Marcus, at one or another of the undistinguished Asian restaurants in town, where Stanley would, to my dismay, invariably choose the most insipid dish on the menu. Of course we also regularly found ourselves in two of the most glorious spaces on campus: the Lizzie and 329 Sterling Memorial Library, the New Haven office of the American Oriental Society, the other scholarly organization aside from what Stanley liked to call Mother

Yale to which he was fiercely devoted. And then there were wonderful evenings at 711 Elm Street, where we drank red wine while chanting along to Edith Sitwell and William Walton's *Façade*, and there were weekends at his and Bill's cozy country home in Whitingham, Vermont, to which we would drive up in his white pick-up truck and where his legendary sardonic charm and unironic sense of hospitality made possible parties at which a stiffly Teutonic professorial counterpart at another Ivy League institution and an academically unpedigreed local couple could be successfully seated side by side and converse about Verdi and lawnmowers, about the monument to the birth of Brigham Young up there and the grave of William Dwight Whitney down here.

Take a few seconds now to picture your last encounter with Stanley. In my case, the scene is a hotel in Pittsburgh on the last night of the 2018 meeting of the AOS. It was a family gathering, so to speak: his beloved former graduate students Joel Brereton and Stephanie Jamison, the latter one of my other dearest teachers and mentors, were there, too. Stanley was unwell, as unwell as any of us had ever seen him, but I wasn't worried because he was going to live forever. That inimitable combination of youthful spring in his step and ageless wisdom, that acid tongue with heart of gold, that baseball cap, that battered brown briefcase — nothing much had changed over the thirty years of our friendship. But things do change, Stanley didn't live forever, and here we are.

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