

In Memory of Stanley Insler
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Professors teach undergrads and graduate students, we all take that for granted. But senior professors have many opportunities to teach their junior colleagues as well, and, starting in the mid-1990s, Stanley gave me a two-decade-long tutorial in Silk Road languages. Our classroom was first David's Cookies (where they started selling sandwiches when the cookie business didn't provide enough income), then the Educated Burger (which took over a former bowling alley so it was extremely elongated), and finally, Gourmet Heaven (now Good Nature), where we met for over a decade. There Stanley did his best to explain the relationships among all the dead languages of the Silk Road and to persuade me that, due to the odds against any materials surviving more than a thousand years, the known languages represented only a fraction of the languages once spoken in Central Asia. He succeeded.

We taught a Silk Road class a few times together. In 1997 Stanley and our teaching fellow, a talented historian of Vietnam named Charles Wheeler, agreed to take over the grading at the end of the semester because my son Bret was due in mid-May. One of the students—let's call him John Doe—wrote a final paper about the Russian Silk Road explorer Przhevalsky, who gave his name to a species of small Central Asian pony and also to a lesser-known duck. Charles summarized the thesis of the paper, saying, "Przhevalsky loved ducks except when he was shooting them." Charles gave the student a D (maybe an F), and predictably John Doe came to see Stanley to complain about his grade.

"Hello, Mr. Doe, what brings you to office hours?" asked Stanley, knowing full well that addressing an undergraduate so formally was bound to fluster him.

"Professor Insler, I was hoping that we could talk about my paper."

“Your paper?” And then Stanley began to quote chunks of the paper from memory. He always denied it when I said that he had a photographic memory (how else could he remember all those verb endings for Sanskrit?), but he certainly did.

“Thank you for your time, Professor Insler,” replied Mr. Doe, exiting gracefully.

After he retired, Stanley and I would still meet for lunch, often when he returned from vacation. One time he and Bill had taken a car trip out west (probably following the spring meeting of the American Oriental Society). Stanley decided most of their itinerary, but on the last day they went to the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. This was Bill’s request, and Stanley wasn’t very enthusiastic. The museum turned out to be fabulous. Bill and Stanley spent the day looking at John Wayne’s art collection, and it was the best thing they did on the trip, Stanley happily admitted.

As we remember Stanley Insler, let’s recognize, too, that his home life made possible everything he achieved.