

March 12, 2022 ☐

Professor Howard Stein: Intellectual, Psychohistorian, Writer, Poet

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Keywords: American-identity, American West, Coraopolis, Howard Stein, institutional-cultures, medicine, music, Oklahoma, organizational-dysfunctions, poetry, psychohistory, psychology, Slovaks

Introduction

Professor Howard Stein is one of the most astute scholars and insightful human beings I have had the pleasure of meeting. Important as well, in spite of his success as a scholar, he has remained supportive of others and humble. Those of us who have known him for long periods already know this about him and also his immense scholarly breadth and depth, and respected breakthroughs in the field of psychohistory. We know about this because of his amazing volume of work, and because he spoke and wrote from the later 1970s until the present. One can access individuals' lives work by listing all of their accomplishments, that is, positions held, books and articles written, students taught, colleagues mentored, and yet know little about the reasons they accomplished so much. A series of numbers, or even titles, do not tell us what made Stein tick, so to speak, why he worked so hard, and what he was thinking as he searched, taught, and wrote.

One point beyond the list of Stein's work is the question: Why write? Why write almost beyond exhaustion? He says that he wrote because he had to write. He writes, he said in an email to me (personal communication, 8-31-2021), because he was groping, trying to find himself through organizing his thoughts on pages and computer screens. He writes because he needs to defend himself against anxieties by placing them outside of himself. At the same time, he needs others, his listeners and readers, without whom he can neither have put himself out, defend himself, but also because he could not rely on others with whom to interact and with whom to learn. His search is not *on* people, it is *with* people, we are his research partners. This in large part explains why he can narrate the stories of others so well.

An excellent example of his approach is the story about the

MD who recalled only after their conversation: "I Knew I Called You for Something." At its end, Stein (2017) recounted that, "I trusted my physician colleague to lead the consultation to where she needed it to go.... My role was to help her tell the story she did not even know she had within her. Answers would not arise *in* me... but *between us*, the fruit of the dialogue of storytelling and story listening" (pp. 25-28). He writes so empathetically and humanly because he is, as Carolyn Ellis (2016) articulates in a different context, a "compassioned researcher."

He offered his insights in classrooms, consultations, talks at various institutions and conferences, radio interviews, articles, book chapters, books, symposiums, and poems. By cooperating with authors from different fields, he learned and taught at the same time.

There are clearly defined *Leitmotivs* in Dr. Stein's explorations; they range from the early work with Slovak immigrants and descendants, the study of the "adversary symbiosis" of American-Soviet relations, and more recently his writings about the malfunctioning and abuses in public and private institutions and authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, he never abandoned his first research interests, including Jewish, ethnic, and medical concerns.

Thus, early in his career he wrote this essay with Robert F. Hill: "The New Ethnicity and the White Ethnic in the United States: An Exploration in the Psycho-Cultural Genesis of Ethnic Irredentism," in *The Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism I* from Fall 1973. The same year, he explored the medical perspective in "Cultural Specificity in Patterns of Mental Illness and Health: A Slovak-American Case Study" within *Family Process*. Very early on too, he became a psychohistorian; he interwove what he gained from his background as a Jew and by studying psychology, consulting and teaching with his astute sense of history and scholarship in his article, "Judaism and the Group-Fantasy of Martyrdom: The Psychodynamic Paradox of Survival Through Persecution," in *The Journal of Psychohistory* from Fall 1978. Dr. Stein came to his understanding of Judaism "the hard way." While attending public school, his father drove him "four week-days and Sunday to the Jewish district in Pittsburgh, called Squirrel Hill, some 25 miles away, to learn in Hebrew School at my parents' conservative synagogue, Congregation Beth Shalom" (personal communication, 9-9-2021).

I suspect that his remarkable perceptiveness originates with

two main lived realities: one is that he is Jewish and thus became aware of issues specific to ethnicities, and the other is that he lives away from the mega cities at the coasts, in the middle of the country. Significant as well, when he settled in Oklahoma, he became isolated geographically from his roots in the Eastern part of the U.S. and his “nest,” his immediate Jewish family and neighborhood. Being separated physically also meant looking at his background from a measure of distance that most of us attain when we must be or chose to be away from “our” home base, even our group. In his case that was Coraopolis, the small town west of Pittsburgh. Thus, Stein’s deep awareness of, and empathy for the plight of refugees and involuntary emigrants, like the many who are being chased from their homes, and Jews since time immemorial. His early work on psychogeography and psychoanthropology persisted in his awareness of his own separateness.

There is more to it, of course. Living in Oklahoma, far away from the intellectual trends of our top research centers, also allows for other, different perspectives. One is the concentration on one’s job, the other on one’s surroundings. What a boon it is for our understanding of institutions, especially medical ones, and our awareness of the vast plains of Oklahoma and America as a whole. Yet, even as he recognized the brutality of larger institutional and corporate systems first-hand away from the frenzy of other researchers, he stayed connected to his heritage. So, firing became firing in the sense of the fires of the ovens of the Nazi state. The brutality of American health care systems became linked to that of authoritarian regimes. His understanding for the misunderstood, the outsiders, the oppressed, the fired, and those who abuse and were abused. To trace the progress more fully, one also needs to know about his education and work history.

Stein “attended grade, junior high, and high school in Coraopolis, graduating in 1963” (personal communication, 9-8-2021). He followed with degrees from the nearby University of Pittsburgh for both his undergraduate and graduate training (BA 1967, major in historical musicology, and PhD 1972, in anthropology, with specializations in medical and psychological anthropology).

He took his first work assignments in Pittsburgh, PA, in 1970 as a teaching assistant in the American National Ethnic Traditions program at the University of Pittsburgh. In 1971 he taught in the nursing program in the Pittsburgh Hospital of Penn State Uni-

versity, then he was an instructor in anthropology in the Department of Behavioral Sciences at Point Park College (1971-1972), and after that he was an associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry (1972-1978). During that time, he taught psychiatry residents and medical students clinical anthropology. In 1978 he moved to the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, Oklahoma City, OK, in the Department of Family Medicine, where he worked as a faculty member with interns and residents in the behavioral science curriculum, focusing on doctor-patient relationships, and facilitated thousands of Balint groups. He also taught in rural Family Medicine residency programs in Enid, Shawnee, and Lawton, and focused on rural medicine and rural health. In total, he spent nearly 35 years in Family Medicine in Oklahoma.

Stein began his major publications with *The Ethnic Imperative: Examining the New White Imperative* (1977), *Slovak-American Identity* (1980), and seven years later, after he had moved to Oklahoma, he penned *The Psychoanthropology of American Culture* (1985). Once he had fully settled there, he shifted even more to Oklahoma farming culture, medical culture, and human beings being affected by them. After 1994, Stein increasingly researched overall organizational cultures and the difficulties employees face in them. The first of these was *Listening Deeply*, which I introduced above. At that point, he had not fully realized the difficulties and trauma so many employees endure in medical and other organizations. Once he did, he and Seth Allcorn examined such topics as *The Dysfunctional Workplace* (2015) with other topics becoming clear from the list of books in the endnotes. The latest publication is by Seth Allcorn and Howard Stein (2022), titled *Psychoanalytic Insights into Social, Political, and Organizational Dynamics: Understanding the Age of Trump*.

In Seth Allcorn's and Howard Stein's (2020) *The Psychodynamics of Toxic Organizations: Applied Poems, Stories and Analysis*, the authors integrated stories about abuses of corporate culture with Stein's poetry and explanatory essays. They took one of his poems about abusive situations and explained it through the intersection between an individual, or group of individuals, and the authors. As the authors explain succinctly in the book's blurb:

Understanding experience at work... is a multidimensional undertaking that must include all senses.... Poetry at its best condenses into relatively few words, metaphors, and images what conventional social science narratives would take

much longer to articulate. Where poetry often hints and alludes, narrative seeks to spell out, expound, and complete. ... Applied poetry and its contextual stories offer a way of accessing workplace experience that is unique and valuable in terms of understanding lives at work. The use of complementary psychodynamic theories ... is a way of trying to account for what we have found and experienced and in particular why it happened. (Stein & Allcorn, 2020, book statement from Routledge)

Stein and Allcorn speak of individuals, for example, being fired not because of poor performance, but because of supervisors who embraced their organization's policies after it had been acquired. It cut positions to squeeze out the funds required to purchase the company, or to turn a profit before "unloading" it in turn. The usual euphemism for such activities is "downsizing." Some of the stories are heartbreaking; one must empathize.

I was in my early 20s when I experienced an abusive supervisor who fired me not because of poor work performance, but because he was in constant tussle with my immediate supervisor. I was unemployed, out on the street, without much experience in American society. How can we fully understand such undercut and fired employees? Stein teaches us that one listens, becomes immersed in their lives, and hopefully helps ease transitions.

In order to understand and articulate lived workplace experience in-depth, Stein wrote hundreds of "organizational" poems and elucidates them through storytelling and exploring underlying psychodynamic processes. He began to write poetry in 1991; so far, he has published ten poetry books. But these publications do not reflect the full oeuvre of several hundred poems. Being away from the center encouraged poetry that was not as much about it, but the periphery. In addition, part of his approach is to highlight stories, but through poetry, that is, people telling of their experiences and then melding them with his ability to reflect on them succinctly.

Poetry is said to be expressive of the inner and maybe even unconscious world. Stein argues differently: The "inner world is always in relationship with the outer world of people, nature, technology." Indeed, we need words to express ourselves; we acquire them through our fellow human beings, and the tone and message of a poem rarely flows without the language specific to a culture. It carries the whole culture with it. Thus, psychohistorical poetry ena-

bles Stein to offer another fascinating perspective. It breaks the rigidity of psychohistory, with its emphasis on compositions, and allows others of us who endeavor to write psychohistorical poetry to face the public with it.

Poetry is, to quote him, “inter-subjective, not subjective as in some sort of hermetically sealed-off self of the world.” That is why he connects poetry to the stories of others about institutional behavior that is often destructive and brutal. Having experienced being fired, he captured the essence of the hurt that employees undergo when they face supervisors who “don’t give a damn,” or throw them out, like chaff, a dehumanization that may be likened to that of the worst regimes here and abroad. I am thinking of the Russians who have the choice these days of leaving their homeland or rotting in jail in Siberia. Haunting memories of Stalin! A few words can succinctly express the sense of loss and homelessness. As Stein has said, poetry complements and deepens narrative prose. As my father-in-law stated it: “I can understand your poetry better than your text.” Not only specialists can read Stein’s poetry. Surely that is psychohistory at its very best... to reflect the experience of others, to elucidate through poetry the past and present accurately, clearly, and humanly.

The following poem stems from a different context and illustrates Dr. Stein’s ability to feel, understand, and express his approach to life and work. The last line of “Filament” spoke to me the moment I first read the poem in 2018.

The world is held together
Not by glass or steel,
But by the thinnest filament,
Unseen but yet more real.
Its strands can come from anywhere,
Below or from above,
It weaves with great tenacity
And has the name of love. (Stein, 2018, p. 35)

Stein’s love of music goes all the way back to his childhood (and his relationship with his father, a violinist) and later his undergraduate major; it opens us up further to his varied intellect. When reading his poetry aloud, they are often not only a visual but also a tonal feast. Music, he wrote is “soul, my essence, my cherished companion...”; indeed, how can one ever forget J.S. Bach’s *Matthew Passion*? Or Mahler’s *Auferstehung*? Or so many other works of well-

known and not so prominent composers? They speak Stein's language, he recognizes it as his own; he is at home and at peace, even if some works are "difficult," they offer light, courage, hope, healing, even the sense of floating in a different moment in time and universe. Often too, they provide a sense of relief. For music has been, like for so many others, a guide to a more meaningful life, one that sometimes has had to be lived under the most tortuous circumstances.

Howard the Man

Dr. Stein's name is apt. He is a rock of values that are not washed off just because our society has allowed its negative side to emerge from the shadows. He has the temerity to speak up and cry out for those who are crushed by society's uncaring, deceitful, abusive, lying, and brutal "leaders." The exceptional Russian author Vasily Grossman in his novel *Stalingrad* (translated Robert & Elizabeth Chandler, 2019) saw it in German society of the 1930s when its underbelly rose to the top. We notice the corrosion in this country in Stein's work long before the behavior of some untoward American corporate figures rose to "lead" organizations. Corporations, he reiterates, do not care about human beings, they care about the bottom line; that approach depersonalizes and objectifies people, makes them into disposable "things." It takes courage to comment and highlight this upending of our culture. Even as Dr. Stein's assessment is accurate, it can be dangerous to articulate. If Stalin had not died, Grossman would most likely have been arrested; he told the truth about the German and Soviet/Russian societies. Professor Howard Stein is such a perceptive and courageous individual in our midst.

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Cultures and Cults: Howard F. Stein's Contribution to the Analysis of Culture and Its Discontents

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Keywords: anthropology-psychoanalytic, cult, culture-analysis, culture-therapy, ideology, ritual, symbol

It was in the pages of *The Journal of Psychological Anthropology* (1978-1980) and its continuation *The Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology* (1981-1987), published in New York by The Association for Psychohistory, that I initially came across Howard F. Stein's articles, in connection with other writers, such as Lloyd deMause, Weston La Barre, Arthur E. Hippler, and Georges Devereux. Thus, I first identified Dr. Stein as an anthropologist who applied psychological and psychoanalytic theories to cultural issues. Gradually, I found that Stein's amazingly large literary production was truly interdisciplinary, creatively combining several fields of research and enlarging the perspectives not only of anthropology (cultural and social), psychology (clinical, cultural, organizational, work), and psychoanalysis (Freudian, Kleinian, ego-psychology, relational) but also those of psychohistory, family theories and therapies, the study of religion, philosophy, etc.

However, there are more dimensions that can be detected in Stein's writings. Even in the middle of highly theoretical discussion, scientific argumentation, and exacting definitions, I have sensed in Stein's writings a very personal style, allowing verve, a traversing verse, a flow of awe to enhance his poetic-experiential inquiry and to embrace the borderlands between knowledge and emotion, the conscious and the unconscious, reality and fantasy. Stein does not categorize or edify truths, and neither does he claim to master reality; rather, he wanders and wonders through the mind- and dreamscapes of human history, culture, and their various expressions.