

Reminiscences of Daniel Stern: A Creative Intellectual

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Dan was a creative intellectual force in psychiatry, and other contributors to this memorial issue *Others* (Perspectives in Infant Mental Health, Vol. 21, 1, Winter, 2013) have addressed have already addressed his seminal contributions to psychoanalysis and developmental psychology. So, instead of talking about his accomplishments, I'd like to reminisce about how much fun he was to be with.

I knew Dan as part of a creative experiment in thinking that pulled a diverse group of strong-willed psychoanalysts and developmental psychologists into close proximity for the past 18 years to think about how change occurs in psychotherapy. Initially, I had my doubts about the whole endeavor. This was a grandiose and impossible topic, at best. At worst, it could have been a breeding ground for intense intellectual conflict, painful disagreements, and mounting frustration.

Instead, it proved to be the adventure of a lifetime. And it was a great adventure largely because of Dan's ability to disarm, diffuse, distract, and, generally, charm us all away from those moments of fierce intellectual standoff that threatened to become personal. I still don't know how he did it.

Dan's spirit of whimsy and play were his special gift. He could turn on a dime from a penetrating summary of the last three hours of discussion to a moment of fantasy, or a burst into song, or a quick joke. Just when you thought you were in terminal conflict with him, he was giving you a bear hug and dragging you up from your chair into a soft-shoe routine complete with canes and hats. What's not to like about this guy?

Dan knew how fragile an idea could be, and he was fierce in defense of fragile ideas so they had room to grow and develop. I think it was his completely forgiving acceptance of other people that allowed



From left Christine Schechter, Daniel Schechter, Karlen Lyons-Ruth, Nadia Stern, Daniel Stern, Sandra Rusconi Serpa and Francois Ansermet in Geneva (April 2010). Photo by Bill Ruth.

him to be so intellectually fierce. He could turn any moment of building tension and locked intellectual horns into a warm embrace, and I know that many others had that experience of Dan. He thrived on confrontation and resolution, gladiatorial combat followed by a drink at the bar, thundering his point and then letting it go and giving over to someone else's persuasive argument. So it became a lot of fun to fight with him, when you knew at the end of the day you could look forward to a poker game, or cognac and cigars, or some wine and chocolate.

I remember going to a restaurant in Naples in the late afternoon after a long overnight flight, and somehow by the end of the meal Dan had all of us singing arias with the waiters. I remember him, in his best Paul Newman style, upping the betting in a vicious poker game on Virgin Gorda. I remember he and Jeremy Nahum doing old camp skits for Lou Sander's 80th birthday party. I remember Dan in Italy grabbing a surprised street cleaners' broom and sweeping the streets of Rome for an impromptu photo op. And of course, every joke I know came from Dan.

My favorite pictures of Dan, which I always show when teaching Dan's work to child psychiatrists, were pictures taken one evening in Nantucket after a particularly

intense day of struggling with a dispute in the group. Some music was playing on the radio after dinner and Dan jumped up and started dancing with Alice, and then with Adrian, and finally with Lou Sander, who was then in his 80's but still very light on his feet. That picture of Dan dancing with Lou is one I'll always treasure.

One of Dan's greatest jokes involves a cloistered monk late in the 15th century. This monk was in charge of overseeing the rules of monastery life, and one day he decided to go back into the depths of the dust-covered stacks of illuminated manuscripts to find out what the sacred text had said in the original version, before centuries of laborious copying had occurred. The monk was gone for a long time and his assistant became worried and went down into the stacks to check on him. He found the old monk bent over the original text, sobbing and sobbing. He rushed over and said, "Father, what's wrong? What's wrong?" The old monk slowly raised his head and said, "In the original, it says, Celebrate!"

Dan had a special gift for celebrating life, and I celebrate his life with all of you through this special memorial tribute.