

## Hallowing the Ordinary. An Acceptance Speech in the Form of a Love Letter: The Omer C. Stewart Memorial Award<sup>1</sup>

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I feel honored, pleased, grateful, downright thrilled! Savor this moment with me. It is yours as well as mine. It is holy. It is meant to elevate the ordinary into the sacred. I regard the Omer Stewart Award as a gift, not as a piece of personal property. Now, I do not refuse it and give it back; I do not return it to you. But I wish to recognize it and this moment in our history for what it is, and who all it represents. It is a sacred trust, Omer Stewart's medicine bundle.

If the Omer Stewart Award recognizes my work and me then I recognize you in return, you who are here, and your predecessors. This award is a monument to a relationship, not to an island of "productivity." If what I say contains a tincture of humility, then it equally contains a tincture of Durkheim, Freud, Weston La Barre, Anthony F.C. Wallace, Martin Buber, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. The answer to the question of identity, "Who am *I*," is partly answered by a related question, "Who are *you* who recognize and honor me?" The honor I receive says something vital about *us* as it says something about *me*.

Many years ago, one of my bosses in Oklahoma characterized me, with a mixture of admiration and suspicion, as a "paper factory." He could not have been observing me very closely. He was not present at the countless up-dates I requested from Art Campa on the longitudinal Garden City study, or at Art's nuanced discussions of educational and health needs of Latino peoples of the eastern and western slopes of the Rockies. He did not overhear my conversations with Mary Granica and Theodora Tsongas on such applied medical anthropology issues as Rocky Mountain Arsenal or with Darwin Solomon on rural agriculture, values, and health. He could not know how much of a 1988 talk at the annual conference by Ken Keller I wove into a regular seminar offered to physicians and physician assistants in occupational medicine. He could not know how much I came to rely on Deward Walker in late 1997 and 1998 to give me the courage to navigate through the depression and despair I experienced almost daily in my workplace. What my former supervisor thought he noticed to be an intellectual manufacturing plant was in fact more like Levy Bruhl's "mystical participation." This "Stein" is

not an island unto himself. You have made me feel welcome. Much of my work flows from that abiding feeling we clumsily now call "intersubjective."

Permit me to be an ethnographer of this event as well as its honoree. Who are you -- who are the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology -- who recognize *yourselves* in awarding this to me? What kind of organization -- what kind of culture -- has and bestows an Omer Stewart Award and chooses to bestow its honor on people such as me? You are the kind of people who, at a conference some years ago, plant and bless a fledgling tree. You are the sort who makes quick work out of organizational overviews and journal mission statements: they take a few days rather than a few turbulent decades. You are the sort who holds retreats like some holy order, and conduct early spring conferences as if they were, in part, retreats. You are a tribe in which elders teach their wisdom to their juniors rather than withhold it, and in which young students are offered opportunities to teach and lead as well as to learn. You are a tribe whose major failing, so far as I can tell, is that you still have an imperfect membership list. We all are one another's shepherd; we do not want.

There is a planetary urgency to this house. There is a wish to "do the right thing," to abide by an ethics that transcends easy doctrines of "cultural relativism," "post-modernism," and "political correctness." Misunderstandings, misconceptions, hatred, and suffering occupy us more than adherence to a dogma.

A week after I learned of this Award, I was in the process of sending out an announcement of this forthcoming honor. I misspelled Omer Stewart's name: I called the name "Steward." No, I was not confusing him with Julian Steward. I made a genuine parapraxis, a slip of the pen, one that I quickly recognized. Then I smiled. I have come to trust my slips to betray the secret of my heart: they tell me that I know far more than I think. "*Stewardship*" is what Omer Stewart and the award named for him are about. It is also at the heart of what the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology is about. You won't find it labeled as such in mission statements or in strategic plans -- you

don't need to because we don't need to write it down. It's there, part of the ethos, part of the devotion.

I go by a number of professional labels -- not to mention some epithets as well. I have spent my nearly thirty years as a "professional" doing many odd-looking and odd-sounding things. They have not seemed bizarre to me, but to many they have constituted wrong-thinking and non-work. I seem to threaten many people. In many areas of my work-life I have sustained a chronically induced identity crisis. "Howard, exactly what is it that you *do*?" Colleagues and supervisors who have known me for years ask me. I continue to be examined by a number of supervisors and colleagues who peer at me through the Foucaultian "gaze." It is as if I were an irredeemable alien if not monstrosity who doesn't even pull his own weight in generating income. What worth could he possibly have to the organization?

Whatever names I might go by or am ascribed, I am certain by now that I am *also* an applied anthropologist. In much of my professional work-life, I find myself getting a bloody head by banging on roles and statuses that will not or cannot admit me to their company. By contrast, I have been welcomed in applied anthropology. Year after year at the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology conferences, and in discussions on the phone, you tell me that I am at home here, that I and what I do *belongs*. There is a good "fit" between what I would like to think of myself and what others think of me and of the kind of things I do. I do not feel weird. I do not feel embattled. I feel relief and comfort, as well as exhilaration. I do not feel I have to struggle constantly for my soul. I simply get on with the work. My work. Our work.

If, as an applied anthropologist, I do not always or directly "solve" problems, I try to contribute -- if often only in pointing out that an organization is inadvertently trying to solve the wrong problem. Our all-American "can-do" penchant for "fixing things" quickly is more than occasionally part of the problem. I learn how, and when, and with whom, as well as what, in the process of doing. Occasionally, I even create problems! An applied anthropologist has the luxury of conducting Einsteinian "thought experiments" and Michelson-Morley empirical testing of (relativity) theory in the field. I find it no intellectual disgrace to situate theory, method, and practice in the same equation. To understand trees, it is helpful to try to grow one. "Reflection" and "action" are among the

most pernicious, and unproductive, false dichotomies in human thought. Through all my years with the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology -- that go back to the early 1980s, though not to the very beginning of the Society -- I have consistently felt that I dwelled among some of the finest minds thinking currently about human nature, human culture, and human cultures. Here I could find that some of the loftiest thoughts came from "the trenches."

I want to conclude my acceptance talk by addressing one substantive issue that concerns us all. I direct our attention to a matter of grave cultural, and international content: the creation within the United States and worldwide of vast cadres of unwanted peoples. At this moment in April 1999, international attention is focused on the slaughter of Albanians by Serbs in Kosovo. A few years ago, it was Bosnia and Iraq and Rwanda. I want to add to our growing compendium of brutality, atrocity, and the worldwide manufacture of *refugees*. I want to stay as close to experienced reality and avoid euphemism. Within the United States, since the 1980 , a vast population of economic refugees has been created and sustained by a *symbolic* equivalent of bloody "ethnic cleansing." If there are no literal massacres or mass graves, there are casualties nonetheless. We are manufacturing them at home, and they are largely unseen.

A whole landscape ("semantic network") of terms at once evokes and defines this manifestly business ethos. Downsizing. Reduction in force. RIFing. Rightsizing. Restructuring. Reengineering. Reinventing. Outsourcing. Surplusing. Deskillling. Organizational flattening. Vertical and horizontal integration. Retooling. Autonomous self-managing teams. Privatization. Globalization. Shareholder optimization. Productivity. Cost-containment. Survival. Competitiveness. Managed care. Healthcare providers and consumers. Empowerment. Quality assurance. Open door policy. And above all: *The bottom line*. These are less a string of separate, distinct, words as they are a core, linked, vocabulary of a world dimly intimated. Culturally -- "emically" -- we say they are all about "business" or "economics," as though that explains everything. The words are more correctly understood as fragments of a world view. They have become moral imperatives in the guise of rational business decision-making. I have discussed these at length elsewhere as euphemisms that mask vast destructiveness and self-destructiveness (*Euphemism, Spin, and the Crisis in Organizational*

*Life*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1998).

They are markers of the inner experience of work in the American workplace of the 1980s and 1990s. In their euphemistic aridity, they convey what work *feels* like -- feelings about work that become part of work: desolation, the sense of futility, of futurelessness -- at the same time that we hurl ourselves toward the future in the name of "productivity," "competitiveness," and "survival." Bottom-line thinking masks and simplifies the problem of evil that it enacts. Downsizing (and cognate terms), far from being a rational solution, is commonly viewed as the only, and inexorable, solution to the loss or threatened loss of profit. Its automatic thinking -- and irresistible action -- belies its cultural nature. Mass firing or layoff is cultural obsession and compulsion in the guise of economic necessity. So is the creation of masses of temporary workers, gypsy professors, and others deprived of any benefit besides a current wage. They are useful until they are disposable.

Bottom-line thinking -- ranging from downsizing to managed care -- is the American way of induced-suffering and death in the guise of enlightened, inexorable economics. The corporate spreadsheet -- not the firing squad or the gas chamber -- is a currently dominant American way of disposing of unwanted people and categories of people: symbolic genocide simply turns people out into the cold. I emphasize that I do not say this for dramatic "effect" through hyperbole. I describe.

When, in mid-1998, Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the Board of the Federal Reserve, proclaimed that the economy of the U.S. was the "healthiest" it had been in fifty years, including rates of employment, he did not speak of the lower wages and fewer (if any) benefits for which many workers had to settle because they had been fired from better, previous ones. An attitude of Social Darwinism prevails behind the optimistic double-speak: If people cannot fend for themselves, it is their own fault. "The Economy" -- reified, biologized, and anthropomorphized -- is in fine shape, and that is what matters. As in nationalist ideology, individual lives and bodies are sacrificed (and expendable) in the name of the symbolic immortality of the corporate social unit: from business corporation to nation-state. Economics is the medium and language of the sacrifice. Americans are simply put out on the streets to fend for themselves or disappear to who-cares-where.

The widespread wish that unwanted peoples *disappear* further links the "ethnic cleansings" of recent years (Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo) with their equivalent *corporate cleansings* through downsizings, RIFs, and the like. Both these forms create mass *refugee* problems, and are byproducts of the wish to secure boundaries or borders, and thereby organismic-like survival, via *expulsion of unwanted parts*. Hans Frank, the Governor General of Poland under the Nazis, declared, "All that I ask of the Jews is that they disappear." Current leaders of nations and corporations have said the same, in deed if not in word, about their own disposable people. In the process, everyone becomes terrorized. Those who remain behind -- the survivors -- are by no means free. Within the nation state of the United States, we are witnessing the widespread creation of problems of refugees, (internal) migration, emigration, and the vast social boundary problems that follow in the wake (Where are they to go? Who wants them?). Largely in part because Americans do not wish to notice this domestic problem, we fail to label it. We all live in Bosnia, or Kosovo, now.

It is *that world*, where "there" comes to be "here," where "them" comes to be also "us," and where "foreign" comes to be "familiar," that Omer Stewart long ago recognized in his championing of Native American peoples' religious rights here in our own back yard. It is *that spirit* of the sacredness of the ordinary that brings us back and attracts us to the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology. I thank you for the *faith* you have expressed in me -- that in my own work, I continue this spirit.

#### Notes

1. The 1999 Omer C. Stewart Memorial Award was presented at the annual meeting of the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology in Estes Park, Colorado, on April 16 1999.
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