Sherwood Larned Washburn (1911–2000)

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On Palm Sunday (April 16) 2000, Sherwood (Sherry) Larned Washburn completed the quintessentially personal journey of corporeal death, leaving us to grieve and to celebrate his many contributions to our own lives and especially to a greater part of humanity. Privileged from birth in 1911, as a son of the dean of the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and schooled at Groton (1926–31) and Harvard University (B.A., 1935; Ph.D., 1940), Professor Washburn became the twentieth century's preeminent North American physical anthropologist and leading evangelist for a physical anthropology free of typology and assumptive biological determinism. He served as president of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (1951–52) and of the American Anthropological Association (1962). His many honors include receipt of the Viking Fund Medal for 1960 and membership in the National Academy of Sciences. His marriage to Henrietta (Pease) Washburn, who died in 1985, spanned nearly five decades, and he is survived by two sons (Sherwood and Stanley), a brother (Dr. Bradford Washburn), five grandchildren (Saxon 2000), and multifarious scientific heirs (Gilmore 1981).

Sherry was first and foremost a promoter of ideas who championed the application of scientific knowledge to purge the world of destructive discrimination based on folk beliefs about race and constitution and naive applications of poorly processed genetic information. He was passionate, yea feisty, taking no prisoners when he thought that he was right (Washburn and Ciochon 1974).

As I was leaving Berkeley to join the faculty of the University of Chicago in 1964, Sherry told me that one should change institutions once per decade. His own postdoctoral institutional tenures comprised a westward emigration, beginning in anatomy at Columbia University (1939–47), with an interlude at the University of Chicago (1947–58), where he replaced Wilton M. Krogman and served as chair of Anthropology (1952–55), and ending at the University of California, Berkeley, Department of Anthropology, where he complemented Theodore D. McCown, served as chair (1961–63), retired (1979), and resided until his death.

Harvard and the Rejection of Typology

It is difficult to imagine a career more blessed by wonderful scientific mentors, associates, and opportunities than that which shaped Sherry Washburn. At Harvard University, he worked with a dynamic, engaging classroom teacher, Earnest A. Hooton, who encouraged him to teach his own innovative course on primates and supported his participation in the 1937 Asiatic Primate Expedition, wherein he worked intimately with Adolph H. Schultz and less closely with Clarence Ray Carpenter, collecting, dissecting, and observing primates in Thailand and Sabah, East Malaysia.

Before going to the field, he had studied human anatomy at the University of Michigan with W. T. Dempster, who emphasized functional morphology, and at Oxford University with Wilfrid E. LeGros Clark, who stressed total morphological patterns and choice of truly comparable traits in biometric studies (Washburn 1942a, 1942b, 1942c). Courses in comparative anatomy and paleontology with Alfred S. Romer at the Museum of Comparative Zoology also had primed him to profit from his Asian field experiences. His only published paper as a graduate student was as junior coauthor (Lawrence and Washburn 1936).

I share two anecdotes related to me by Adolph Schultz during a study visit in Zürich in 1966. Ever the empiricist, Schultz was annoyed by young Sherry's remark that if he presented ten ideas, he would be remembered for the one that was right, and Schultz was amused that in 1937 Sherry saw little to be gained from Carpenteresque studies of wild primates. Indeed, Sherry will be remembered more for the leading ideas that he promoted, but Schultz's amusement is justified, because beginning in the late 1950s, Sherry spearheaded the renaissance of behavioral primatology in anthropology.

Washburn (1982a, 1983) credited discussions in 1938, while hotly macerating skeletons with fellow Harvard student, Gabriel Ward Lasker (1999:51), for his enlightenment about human variability based on population genetics contra racial and constitutional typologies and his conversion from being "an unthinking Republican into an unthinking Democrat" (1982a:172).

Columbia and Experimental Anthropology

After settling in to teach human anatomy in the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University, Washburn (1942d, 1943) published papers based on the monkeys collected in Sabah and regularly presented papers that stressed novel approaches, functional perspectives, and properly controlled comparisons at meetings of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. He also conducted experimental embryological and ablation experiments on nerves, bones, and muscles in nonprimates to inform the development of cranial features. The plasticity of bone and its responsiveness to influences of soft tissues and behavior (versus genetic preformation) were underscored by this research (Washburn and Detwiler 1943; Washburn 1946a,b, 1947). Like his work with patterns of epiphyseal fusion, Washburn stressed a regional functional approach to analyses versus routine bone-by-bone biometrics.

At the peak of arrogant destructive excesses by Nazis and Imperial Japanese, Washburn (1944a) published his first essay on race. He argued that we should not abandon subspecific classification of modern humans: race is strictly an anatomical concept, of some utility in medical sciences, e.g., obstetrics, and for tracing population movements, but with nothing to do with intelligence, language, or other cultural traits.

In 1944, Washburn (1944b) also started a prolific series of outspoken book reviews, bashing William Howells's treatment of race in *Mankind So Far* (1944b), but with enthusiastic commentary on Robert M. Yerkes' *Chimpanzees,* closing with: "The reader will get an insight into the problems and methods of a branch of experimental science which will be even more valuable to many than the account of the latest 'servant of science,' the chimpanzee" (1944c:224). Apparently, he was unbothered by the fact that Yerkes (1943:89–301) aimed to discover how chimpanzees might be altered, thereby serving as prototypes for human biological engineering (Tuttle 1986: 180–181). Indeed, throughout his career, Washburn believed that nonhuman primates could be used as materials and models to save human lives and to advance medical science.

At the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), Washburn (1983) visited with Franz Weidenreich, who freely discussed fossil hominids with him, sometimes with the originals in hand. He also interacted with William King Gregory and Theodosius Dobzhansky, who were professors in Columbia's Department of Zoology. Gregory's (1914, 1934, 1947) emphasis on function and habit to explain adaptation and evolution, his palimpsest theory (aka mosaic evolution), and his advocacy of a brachiating pongid ancestral to humans also impressed Washburn (1950a, 1963a). Dobzhansky's (1937) participation in formulating the modern evolutionary synthesis—a union of population genetics and palaeontology—reinforced and expanded the perspectives that Washburn had developed via discussions with Gabe Lasker at Harvard.

In New York, Sherry met and quickly established a highly productive, lifelong relationship with Paul Fejos, founder and first director of the Viking Fund, which later became the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. He continued to be a valued advisor to Lita Osmundsen, the foundation's second director and widow of Fejos.

The Viking Fund not only supported Washburn's experimental research and his first trip to Africa (1948) to collect monkeys in Uganda (Washburn 1950a) and to study South African pelves (1949) and australopithecines (Washburn 1950b, 1957; Washburn and Patterson 1951) but also his conduct of summer seminars for physical anthropologists at its New York headquarters in 1946, 1947, and 1948. They greatly accelerated and redirected the field and broadcast Washburn's concept of a new physical anthropology in keeping with the modern synthesis in evolutionary biology (Lasker 1999:91–93).

Chicago and the New Physical Anthropology

The Department of Anthropology of the University of Chicago was a very different intellectual environment from that in which Washburn had worked in New York, and he took to it like a gibbon to the treetops. He inherited some graduate students from Krogman and mentored new arrivals. Initially, he and his students worked on a variety of methodological and functional morphological puzzles (Gavan et al. 1952; Hanna and Washburn 1953; Mednick and Washburn 1956; Washburn and Buettner-Janusch 1952; Washburn and Howell 1952). By the end of his tenure, his focus had shifted to primate behavior, in part, because he was possessed by the ghost of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown via Fred Eggan, Robert Redfield, Sol Tax, and visiting British social anthropologists (DeVore 1992; Gilmore 1981; Washburn 1983). Washburn, Robert Braidwood, and frequent visitors cotaught a three-quarter introduction to human evolution and archaeology.

As co-organizer with Dobzhansky of the landmark Cold Spring Harbor Symposium "Origin and Evolution of Man," and other published arguments for a new physical anthropology that emphasized problem orientation, experimentation, functional and adaptive complexes, and observations of live animals, preferably in the wild, Washburn (1950b, 1951, 1953, 1983:16–18) saltated to the summit of contemporary anthropology and secured card-catalogue immortality.

Sherry helped to establish an Evolution Laboratory in Walker Museum under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology and the Committee on Paleozoölogy, which later became the renowned Committee on Evolutionary Biology of the University of Chicago. He also organized a

program in physical anthropology that aimed to make the study of evolution, in part, a laboratory science, to develop methods to check evolutionary theories by controlled experiments, and to remove futile debate from the field. For decades after his departure, students in the Department of Anthropology pursued this agenda with great success, though the tertiary goal has proven elusive.

Berkeley and Behavioral Primatology

At the University of California, Berkeley, Sherry taught a popular introductory course for undergraduates and few classes or seminars for graduate students, conducted little primary research (Washburn 1963a; Washburn and DeVore 196la, b), attracted numerous "wannabe" primatological anthropologists, and made major contributions to the advancement of science via the organization of several benchmark conferences (DeVore 1965; Washburn 1961, 1963b). Concurrently, via speeches, essays, book reviews, and other venues he contributed to scientific, humanitarian, and public policy issues (Washburn 1963c, 1974, 1975, 1977, 1993) long after taking emeritus status. He especially argued for the uniqueness of humankind among the Primates (Washburn 1969, 1978a, b; Washburn and Dolhinow 1983; Washburn and Harding 1975) and against free applications of sociobiology to the human condition (Washburn 1978c, 1982b).

Getting Personal

Like Hooton, Sherry Washburn inspired, mentored, and provoked numerous students to become professional evolutionary anthropologists. Further, more than anyone else I know, he is responsible for situating primatology in the human sciences. It is remarkable how many liberal arts colleges in the United States, which have only one physical anthropologist on the faculty, have chosen a primatologist versus someone from one of its other subdisciplines.

Sherry was highly sensitive and at times deeply hurt by former students who strayed from the courses that he thought they should follow or who simply disagreed with him. He was particularly upset, indeed infuriated, when some of them supported applications of sociobiology and behavioral genetics to the human condition. His shoot-from-the-hip approach to alternative ideas and his toughly competitive spirit frustrated and angered protégés, who sometimes lashed back inappropriately. For example, I pray that he never read the petty caricature (Trinkaus and Shipman 1993:282, 284–285) that appears to have been provided by a former student who surely owes him much more respect and gratitude for advancing his career.

In print or on the dais, Sherry gave no quarter to former students and others who published ideas with which he disagreed. Although we never concurred about the role of knuckle-walking in hominid evolution, sometimes he graciously sought me out at national and international meetings so that we might talk privately and personally over lunch about a variety of other topics that were on his mind. It was through these all-too-brief encounters that I learned the depth of his concern about how misplaced scientific "facts" can harm others and also about his budding spiritual sensitivity.

My endurant memory of him is one of deep respect for his fine mind and concern for persons who were much less privileged than he, and I am profoundly grateful for the opportunities that he created for me, including the suggestions that I apply my anatomical knowledge to interpret the hand of Olduvai Hominid 8, study at Yerkes Regional Primate Research Center, and, especially, that I observe free-ranging nonhuman primates and other mammals in East Africa, Sri Lanka, and Zimbabwe.

In brief, Sherry Washburn was a dedicated, visionary, socially conscious intellectual leader and synthesizer sui generis, the likes of whom we probably will not see again in anthropology as the field fragments and faddish constituents foster phalanxes of biophobiacs.

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Correction: In the September 2000 obituary for Ashley Montagu by Susan Sperling (*AA* 102[3]:583–588), it is stated that "Coming to America in 1927, Montagu obtained a position as Curator at the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum. . . ." It should read: "Coming to America in 1927, Montagu obtained a position at the American Museum of Natural History. . . ."