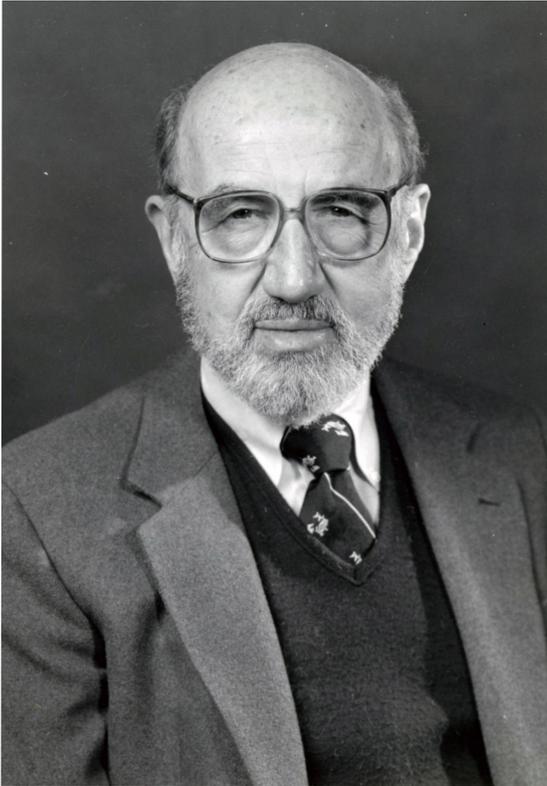




THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE
Harvard University

Avery Danto Weisman



Avery Danto Weisman, MD
Professor of Psychiatry, Emeritus
13 December 1913 - 2 January 2017

Dr Weisman died in the sunshine of Arizona at the age of 103, punctuating the end of his life with something he often said during it, “*As you realize, nothing occurs until it happens.*”

Residents would chuckle when he said this, taking it as a Berraesque quip. Only later, perhaps only might a few, might grasp its wisdom, and maybe only those who had read Wittgenstein. But it captures his genius, and his dark, vast, and humane humor. It is fitting - and comforting - that he remained active and mentally alert until his last days.

From Montefiore Hospital in Pittsburgh, Avery came to Boston as a resident of Stanley Cobb, the first chief of psychiatry at the MGH. Originally, he was to have one year of psychiatry as part of neurologic training, but to the dismay of his neurologic attending, Raymond D. Adams, he decided to stay in psychiatry.

Photograph courtesy of the MGH Photo Lab

About meeting Dr. Cobb Avery said, “I started to learn what it means to be and become your own kind of psychiatrist. And this, I promise you takes some doing.” Those fortunate to know Avery well became familiar with his quirky mind. What he observed then remains true today:

“MGH psychiatrists are constantly pulled in one way by psychodynamics and the human condition, and in the other way by the exclusively biologic and medical influence so rampantly exemplified in the hospital as a whole. It is a kind of specialized human condition in itself to specialize in biology, without the imponderable uniqueness conferred by thinking of individual patients as people with a life of their own. I suppose that anyone who is loyal and committed to MGH psychiatry suffers from this mental nystagmus, looking first in one direction and then in the opposite, always conscious of vacillation between the poles of

*In tribute to their dedicated efforts to science and medicine, deceased members of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine (those at the rank of full or emeritus professor) receive a review of their life and contributions with a complete reflection, a **Memorial Minute**.*

psychodynamics and biology”

“Psychiatrists can either deal with violent passions and bizarre reasons, or dwell more quietly with milder emotions and strong motivations. The latter type talk with patients; the former know that talking is pretty peripheral to the biologic or the central systems of the brain”

After coming to MGH in 1942 and undergoing psychoanalytic training, he started the first psychiatric consultation liaison service with a young fellow, Dr. Thomas Hackett. Later, during the Lindemann years, from 1968 through 1983, Dr. Wiseman worked on his well-known Omega project. These “psychologic autopsies” on people with terminal illnesses resulted in several outstanding books. In addition to this important research, Dr. Weisman became a respected training analyst and carried on his psychoanalytic practice, teaching and theoretical contributions, including work on the existential core of psychoanalysis. His most famous work, *The Existential Core of Psychoanalysis, Reality Sense and Responsibility*, is still read as a classic not only for its durable understanding of the human dilemma but for the beauty of its prose.

But all of these accomplishments shouldn’t overshadow the man. Avery grew up as a teenager in the Great Depression witnessing the loss of his family’s automotive dealership. As well, he saw the suffering of those around him, an experience which would help shape his character. As a child, and well into his 20s, he had a severe and very noticeable stutter. While others might have withdrawn behind a shield of self-consciousness, Avery honed his keen intellect studying mathematics and medicine, literature and philosophy, especially Plotinus. We can glean from letters written by former colleagues and students how he was admired for his intellectual honesty, his warmth and engaging personality, his gentle presence, his humility, patience and generosity, his kindness and thoughtfulness, his understanding and empathy, his gifted writing, his gentle heart, open-mindedness, and his sweet, non-judgmental nature.

Vicki Jackson, MD, the chief of Palliative Care Services at the MGH, reverently refers to the work of Dr. Weisman as foundational to the approach of that service. Avery remained a close personal friend and advisor to Tom Hackett and mentor to generations of MGH psychiatrists. In his later years he continued writing vigorously on psychiatry as well as fictional works.

At our department’s 75th anniversary Gala celebration in 2009 Avery returned to visit with old friends ...The highlight of the evening the thunderous standing ovation received by Avery, “it was a moment I will never forget”

Many years ago he wrote,

“I still wonder if psychiatrists will always be outsiders in a way, observers who are never quite sure of their identity, identifications, ideologies. Time goes on; we are products of our own time as well as prisoners of our prejudices. I don’t think that vacillation will ever become obsolete. So, in that spirit

I've repeatedly asked myself over the years, if given another shot, would I again choose to train at the MGH? Would you? My answer has been an unequivocal yes! But what direction might that career take, were it moved forward a few decades? How could that affect professional and personal identity? To that question, of course, I have no answer, and neither do you”

And as we hear the echo of Avery's thoughts, we know: Neither do we.

Respectfully submitted,

John B. Herman, MD

James E. Groves, MD