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Fifty Years of Public Mental Health
Outside the Hospital

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Weiner, S. (2007). A Socialist youth: An adult needing the welfare state. *The Suspicious Humanist*, 2/10/07

Stephen Weiner attended Stanford University in the late 1960s and had a series of mental health problems that, as he says, have made him “an adult needing the welfare state.” This need has not kept him from making a contribution to the welfare state he acknowledges the need for, and to his fellow citizens. Weiner is the self-publisher and lead writer of *The Suspicious Humanist: A Journal of the Arts & Opinion*, which he started years ago with his late father. In Weiner’s essays, there is little talk of recovery and much talk of struggle and the devastating impact of mental illness in his life, yet his work could be said to represent one face of the recovery movement. He writes about current affairs, the Communist era and its very personal meaning to him growing up with parents who were socialists and sometime Communists, and his experience of mental illness. But, as with Ms. McDiarmid, let’s have Mr. Weiner tell a little bit of his own story. This excerpt from *The Suspicious Humanist* touches on all the themes noted above.

A Socialist Youth; An Adult Needing the Welfare State

My parents, as I have often written in these spaces, were members of the Communist Party USA before and after I was born in 1951. So I grew up hearing about FBI agents coming to the door to harass them, and getting my father fired from several jobs. I am named after Steve Nelson, the commander of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade of mostly Communist volunteer soldiers in the Spanish Civil War against the fascist uprising against the legally-elected Republic led by General Francisco Franco, who was promptly aided by Hitler and Mussolini while American, Britain and France stupidly and shamefully remained neutral. As I wrote here a few months ago, my father was wounded in Spain and again in the South Pacific in World War Two. I grew up seeing my father's very visible wounds and feeling awe, love and gratitude towards him for risking his life to try, essentially, to prevent the Holocaust and the whole world war. As I also wrote, my mother, from a traditionally absolute pacifist long-time Quaker background, decided that Hitler could not be defeated nonviolently, and worked as one of a multitude of women in war industry, a "Rosie the Riveter."

I grew up as a good reader, loving it since the age of four, when my mother said I taught myself to read. That meant reading left-wing books my parents had, mostly published by the Communist-controlled International Publishers and the Communist magazine *Masses and Mainstream*. I read Steve Nelson's book about his sedition conviction under a Pennsylvania law in his home town of Pittsburgh, a conviction that I believe was later overturned by either the Pennsylvania or U.S. supreme courts because the law was a violation of free speech conditions. Not until many years later, when I was at least a teenager or maybe a young adult, did I learn that I was named after him. But here's the point: I was almost a classic "red diaper baby," the Left's term for us children of the Left, and I was heavily influenced by these books, which also included material on poverty in the U.S. and other capitalist countries. We, strangely enough, lived in Orinda, a heavily right-wing suburb of Berkeley, and the New Left was making a lot of news in Berkeley. My father hung out on weekends at the Cafe Mediterranean on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, holding many adult conversations, and I was fascinated. I wanted to be a socialist, though not a communist, as soon as possible.

Well, I've made it plain that I was exposed to Communist ideas; what I need to make clear also is that from a very early age I rejected Soviet and Chinese style communism. I did this partly because my father was breaking with it and constantly pointing out the atrocities of those governments, especially under Stalin (whom both my parents had previously supported) and because I was of course taught about the undemocratic, evil nature of Communism in public school. In addition, I followed the political news on my own from a very young age, and was horrified and disgusted by the Berlin Wall, which the

East Germans/Soviets built in August 1961, I believe, when I was nine years old. I hated school myself (I was labelled a "hyperactive underachiever") and felt so imprisoned by it that I related to all the East Germans who tried to get past the Wall and were shot to death by Communist police and soldiers. The Communists had turned an entire country into a prison.

So I could never be a Communist, but I was disgusted by the politics of the Right picked up by my friends and most of my fellow students from their parents. A great deal of it had to do with attacking welfare programs, particularly among black people in Oakland. Even from a fairly young age, it disgusted me that these children of privilege,—we all were living in one of the most affluent towns in the Bay Area—would attack poor people so viciously. This brings me to the central theme of this article, my instinctive gut level support from the beginning for the welfare state, as it was frequently termed in Britain, the Scandinavian countries, and other places like New Zealand. I knew that individuals and families were frequently overwhelmed financially (mine was because my father had to leave his first career, soil science, due to what he told me later was sexual harassment by his male boss, and the businesses he started, like publishing calligraphy books, were financial failures), and I believed that governments had a right and duty to help them. My parents at some point left the Communist Party, but neither of them ever abandoned the liberal ideals of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

So I entered my older childhood and my teens determined to be a democratic socialist, not a communist. All sorts of groups and tendencies had a presence in Berkeley. I started by giving the American Civil Liberties Union and the Congress of Racial Equality contributions when I was 11 years old. When I was 13, in the summer of 1965, I discovered *Liberation Magazine*, published in New York by the War Resisters League as I recall, and *Freedom*, an anarchist magazine published in London. But I really increased my involvement in the fall of 1965, when I was a high school freshman, and I heard that the prominent and now-legendary group Students for a Democratic Society was holding weekend meetings in Berkeley. My parents agreed to give me rides to and from the meetings (after all, wasn't I a red diaper baby and wasn't it therefore predictable I'd get involved with the New Left?), but they refused to let me formally join, fearing government harassment for my membership, the kind of harassment they had had to endure. So I didn't formally join then, which was ok with me because SDS was such a loose, almost anarchic organization that many people who were involved were not formal members. At that point, SDS was totally nonviolent, which was to change within three years. The quick march of SDS from the democratic Left to a violently pro-communist group impelled me, in 1968, to join the Socialist Party-Young Peoples Socialist League run by the followers of Max Shachtman, an older leader who had gone from orthodox communism in the 1920s to Trotskyism (followers of the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky who lost out in a power struggle with ultra-dictator Joseph Stalin for leadership of the Soviet Union and the world Communist movement) to democratic socialism, the belief in an egalitarian society with much state control of the economy but with democratic freedoms intact.

That's who I was politically as a young kid. I would have to face the Vietnam draft when I turned 18 in 1969, which made politics very personal to me, but I was also motivated by concern over poverty and racism. I never really challenged the need for government economic-assistance programs, though I read plenty of arguments against them by reading literature of the Right, like William F. Buckley's magazine *National Review*. I was always willing to listen to and read the conservative viewpoint, and I agreed with them mostly on the evils of Communism, but they never shook my faith in the need for the welfare state.

But now I must start to change the subject somewhat, for I need to write about the development of my lifelong diagnosed (many times) mental illness, which began on August 28,

1965 when I was 13 and has long since become the reason that I've accepted help from government programs and reached the point I am today, when I live mostly on Social Security Disability (SSDI) money, receive food stamps, and live in a HUD-subsidized apartment building for people with "serious and persistent mental illness." It is what turned my theoretical advocacy of the welfare state to a desperate need for it.

I am going, here, to need to discuss some of the mental issues, some of the things I felt and thought over many decades and in many ways, thoughts and feelings that, when I told them to psychiatrists and other mental health professionals, got me diagnosed with a variety of mental illnesses for the 42 years from 8/28/65 until now. Early on, in my early teens, some things occurred to me that were extremely distressing: I started worrying that I was "queer," homosexual, even though I'd had a long childhood history of having crushes on girls; I started worrying that some malevolent force was going to suddenly change me into a girl (I don't think that's because I was sexist and regarded female as inferior, I think it's because anyone of either sex would be horrified to suddenly have their sex switched on them without warning or their control) and I had to check continually that I was still a boy by putting a hand in my pocket and subtly checking my testicles; and worst of all, everything and everybody seemed literally, physically, ultimately unreal to me, which was intensely lonely because it meant I was the only sentient being in the universe, completely without companionship. A year or so later, I developed an intense fear of my mother's menstrual blood, and had the strong feeling/thought that if I saw any in the house, even a tiny drop, it would render the universe unreal (of course, a huge part of me already felt/thought the universe was unreal anyway, including my mother). I basically did not report these feelings to anyone, even psychiatrists I asked my parents to let me see, because I felt that by doing so I would be rendering the psychiatrist unreal. I was a tortured mess.

Over the months, years and decades different feeling/thoughts rose up out of me to keep me a tortured mess: I started fearing that I would cause an earthquake when I was with my father in the San Francisco Bay Area; I moved from Berkeley to Philadelphia where my mother lived to escape from the earthquake. Later, in Philadelphia, I developed a terror that I would hear on the news that there would be a huge California earthquake and that would be my fault, and also a signal to pick up nearby knives and stab my mother to death. At that point I became absolutely terrified and admitted myself to a mental hospital, with the aid of a good psychiatrist. I've had four psychiatric hospitalizations to date. All of them have involved my suicidality (my sister was a suicide and a bad but seductive example), or my fear that I've been inadvertently evil by murdering people in my sleep, or my continuing feelings/thoughts of derealization, of physical unreality.

What was I doing for work during all these decades, and why did I decide I was unable to work enough to support myself financially, not to mention my daughter, who is 34 now? Well, in high school, I finally learned how to get good grades, how to study, how not to disrupt class (fortunately, one's late high school grades are about all the colleges care about). I started high school in Orinda, but moved across the country in the middle of my sophomore year when my mother moved to Connecticut to escape my father's harassment after she divorced him. New England was a rude shock to me after an all-California childhood, I can tell you that. But, precisely because my family life was such a mess and, as I have said, I was a tortured mess inside, I threw myself into my studies for the first time and was no longer a "hyperactive underachiever." As a result, I was admitted to Carleton College in Minnesota, a very good liberal arts college but relatively unknown outside the Midwest. I chose the Midwest because it was in between my parents, and I had had to choose between them for my home before a judge in a custody battle instigated irresponsibly by my father. I was hypersensitive about choosing either the East Coast or the West Coast for that reason.

Also, Bob Dylan was from Minnesota and had dropped out of the University of Minnesota after a year. At that time, believe me, I wanted to be Bob Dylan.

What I did instead was go back to California, to Stanford University in Palo Alto 60 miles south of where my father then lived in Sausalito. He had finally become the bohemian poet he was always meant to be, and was organizing poetry readings and trying to sell his calligraphy books and calligraphy posters. He was interesting and loving, but I was wary of his weird moods and deep anxieties. The truth is, I became an excellent student in a way I was never an excellent worker in the decades to come. Nearly all my course work involved a lot of reading, and I liked nothing better than to read.

I also at that time had a girlfriend, D, whom I had originally met and been nonsexual friends with since high school. We got together on a camping trip in New Brunswick Canada when she initiated sexual contact with me in the tent we were sharing. Well, I was willing enough. But here came one of the biggest ongoing disasters of my life: sex, instead of making or helping me feel united with her or even close to her, made me feel even more alone in the universe. And we had a lot of sex, at least at the beginning before my torture during it led to my aversion to the whole thing and the total collapse of our marriage. By that time we had a baby daughter and by the time D and I divorced in 1974, I was very attached to her. But we were separated from each other when she was a little younger than three and D went to graduate school in Seattle and I moved to Philadelphia.

The truth is, that in conventional terms, I was never a success again, or even close. I applied for many jobs in journalism and publishing (I'd been first a religion major then a communication major and had idealized reporters since I was a little boy) and got hardly any of them. Most times I never got past the interview stage and many times not even that. I'm sure my inner agitation and disorganization showed up in the interviews. I did during those years work at a couple of interesting jobs, at the Solar Energy Research Institute, a federal laboratory in Golden Colorado (when I lived in Denver) where I wrote abstracts of scholarly articles on alternative energy but never believed the evidence of my own eyes that I had written the right words down, and thus did a very slow job, and another job when I moved back to California after Denver, at the private legal publishing firm Commerce Clearing House, where I abstracted occupational safety and health cases for lawyers' newsletters, but there I simply could not concentrate on the complex material and went on company disability and then state disability and then social security. I have not worked for pay since then, fall 1987. I knew I was, in their language, completely and permanently disabled.

All this time I was active in various democratic socialist groups, led by Michael Harrington, the left-wing intellectual who had written *The Other America*, about poverty, and had inspired Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to start their anti-poverty programs. Harrington had been/was a long-time Shachtmanite (Shachtman himself died in 1972, but not before inspiring future groups of both Marxists and neoconservatives). Harrington was my hero; I stayed in his faction of the old Socialist Party, which had splintered, mostly over Vietnam. I guess it should be obvious that my socialism made it even easier to make the decision to leave the regular workforce and live on disability.