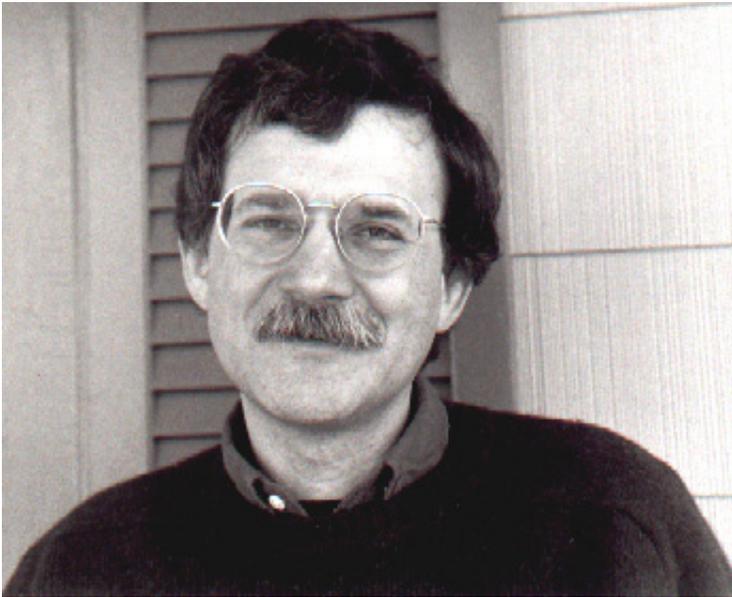


## Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » Remembering Roy Rosenzweig

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Where to begin? It's the only possible response when asked to remember Roy Rosenzweig.

Academics are fortunate if they are able to become pioneers or innovators in a single field; Roy managed to found or advance at least three fields: social history, public history, and digital

history. And we often suspect that pioneers and innovators have character flaws associated with the dogged pursuit of the cutting edge: narcissism, aggression, humorlessness. Yet everyone who knew Roy was amazed at his unparalleled combination of brilliance, insight, and incredible hard work with humility, generosity, and laugh-out-loud wit.

Eight years ago I received a call from Roy, who had heard through a mutual acquaintance that I had moved to Washington. I only vaguely knew of Roy, and had no idea why he should want to talk to me, but nevertheless agreed to meet him for lunch. I'm so profoundly thankful I answered his call.

Roy and I ate at a restaurant near his house and had some nice conversation. I thought little of our casual meeting until a year later, when Roy called me to say that he had just gotten a grant and had remembered a few points I had made over lunch and how relevant they were to the grant proposal. The only thing I could only remember from a year earlier was that Roy was bursting with energy and ideas and had

consumed more coffee over lunch than I drink in a week. We met again for lunch and by the end of the meal he had convinced me to come work with him.

That's how it began for me, and for countless others. Sitting on a panel with Roy at a conference, meeting randomly over coffee, receiving a congratulatory email from him about an article you had written. No matter how trivial the reason behind the first contact, Roy would remember you, and he would often move these minor encounters—the kind most of us have every day and think nothing of—onto a path toward collaboration and friendship.

I know of no one with as large an address book and as many friends as Roy. But he didn't just collect these acquaintances superficially, for show or for his own career ends like so many people do on Facebook or LinkedIn. As his social histories of the United States also emphasize, he viewed every human being as a special resource who brings unique talents and ideas into the world, and he liked nothing more than to connect people with each other.

Almost every topic of conversation prompted a welcome referral from Roy: “You should talk to my friend so-and-so, who has done some really interesting work on that subject.” The history of family photos? “She wrote a great article on that.” Standards for library catalogs? “Met this guy at the Library of Congress.” Byzantine art? Documentary filmmaking? Preservation of eight-track tapes? Him, her, and you're not going to believe this but here's an email address for you. Now go contact them.

But Roy didn't just bring his many acquaintances together. He reveled himself in collaborating with others. Roy found it deeply unfortunate that unlike in the sciences, the humanities suffered from a serious lack of collaboration. He scoffed at the mythical ideal of the intellectual toiling alone on the great book. Roy co-authored over a dozen major works, not to mention the scores of highly collaborative digital projects at the Center

for History and New Media, which he founded at George Mason University in 1994.

A typical but still remarkable moment occurred when Roy received the Richard W. Lyman Award (presented by the National Humanities Center and the Rockefeller Foundation) in 2003 for “outstanding achievement in the use of information technology to advance scholarship and teaching in the humanities.” He got up on stage, used his computer to project a giant list of names onto a screen, and said, “These are all of the people I collaborated with on the projects that this award honors. These are the people that did the work, and I want to thank them.”

Of course, that was just Roy being his usual humble self. Roy’s collaborators will readily admit not only how wonderful but also how daunting it was to work with him. To paraphrase Paul Erdős, Roy was a machine for turning coffee into publications and websites. With his incredible mind and a large coffee nearly always by his side, he was able to produce such a wide and deep array of creative works. When we were writing a book together I would slowly plod along while insightful, beautiful prose seemed to pop off of his laptop at a disturbingly rapid pace. Working with him on a project forced you to elevate yourself, to do the best you could do.

Long before Roy became ill, the staff at the Center for History and New Media would ponder (when Roy was out of the room) what we would do decades hence, when we expected Roy would finally leave this world. In the spirit of Roy’s humor, some of us decided that we would simply have to preserve his brain in a giant vat of fresh-brewed coffee. Others took their cue from science fiction and thought we could transfer his mind onto silicon for the continued benefit of future generations.

If only we could have done so. But perhaps in a partial sense that is what has happened over the last decade. Roy’s thoughts and vision sit on the Center for History and New Media’s server, silently connecting with thousands of people every day, and his books and articles connect with

thousands more.

If only those people could have met Roy Rosenzweig in person. He would have liked to have had coffee with them.

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## References

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