

A EULOGY FOR CARL WHITAKER

By David Keith

April 25, 1995

I feel deeply privileged to share some thoughts with you about Carl Whitaker, this man who was one of my deepest friends. I need to tell you that there are some things in life that I am not able to do without weeping. I am about to find out if giving a eulogy is one of those things. If there are tears as I speak, I need to tell you I am all right, it's just me being me. And of course, feel free to join in with me.

This is a three-part eulogy. It begins with a dream from three nights before Carl's death. Then there is a story about my relationship to Carl. I will end with something I found in Joseph Conrad's work which reminded me of Carl. I must ask Carl's forgiveness in advance, for these are words of praise and of lament. I always knew him to stifle any words of praise which came his way. Words were important to Carl. Each word is a metaphor that speaks from one unconscious to the other. My hope is that you will find Carl Whitaker in these "good words" of mine. There was no effort in preparing this eulogy; when Muriel asked that I say something here, these three fragments simply appeared.

On the Tuesday night, three days before Carl died, I had a long, deep dream. When I became aware of the dream, I was walking in a forest. There was a large great-horned owl riding on my right shoulder and arm. I was surprised that something so large did not feel like a burden. I noticed the talons were long and the claws sharp, but they did not hurt me. The owl's appearance was striking and majestic. I felt blessed that this owl was with *me*. I wondered why I happened to be so fortunate. The owl flew away. As the dream, which happened to be one of those feature-length dreams, continued, I was aware of seeing the owl from a distance, flying here and there. I would see it in the company of other owls. I felt badly that the owl had gone away. But it seemed right; the owl should be among its own kind. I talked to someone about the lost owl, and the person said, "Why don't you call him?" In this comic portion of the dream, the person showed me how to call an owl, "Quaaaccck! Quaaccck!" It didn't work, of course. However, after a time, the owl returned, circled me and perched on my left arm and shoulder. Again, I had a feeling of gratitude for an undeserved blessing, and presumed the owl would soon leave again. But the owl turned its head, looked directly into my eyes, and said, "I will always be with you." Then the owl flew away again. I walked out of the forest and found myself in the suburban neighborhood where I live. There was a large barn about 200 feet from my house, which I had never noticed before. The great-horned owl was perched on the peak of the barn.

At this point I began rising to surface consciousness. I felt refreshed as I was waking. My first association was like a flash I did not want to see. Owls announce

death. In the past year, since Carl's stroke, Muriel told me about a book which she read aloud twice to Carl, *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. It is a story about a young priest who discovers he has a fatal illness, and has a year to live. He accepts a position serving a tribe of Indians in the Northwest on the Columbia River. He goes to live among them as their pastor, but he is much changed by them. The book ends when he dies after he hears the owl call. Soon after, I called Muriel, and she told me then that Carl "was going."

When I came to the University of Wisconsin Hospital in 1971 as a psychiatry resident, I did not know anything about family therapy. I did not know Carl Whitaker. I had been in the Air Force, where I had been the commander of a small hospital. When I became a first-year resident on an inpatient unit, I felt like I had been court-martialed. I mention this because at the outset, it is important to have a sense of the experience of a learner. When an adult enters a training program, the adult feels demoted. Truth is out there, something to be pursued and ingested so that the defective learner can grow up again. I and others were fascinated by the work Dr. Whitaker was doing. We paid a great deal of attention to how he worked and what he said. In our discussions among ourselves we would puzzle over what the Whitaker was all about. Somewhere along the line, I started to feel I was able to explain some of the enigma to my colleagues. I was beginning to integrate the It, which we wondered about. My professional goals as a psychiatrist were still forming at that point, and I decided that whatever else I did, one of my goals would be to explain Carl Whitaker to the world.

This is an important point in the story, because whenever I would utter that phrase, "explain Carl Whitaker to the world," Carl, then later Muriel, would start talking about something else, like sailing, gardening, a book recently read, my family or their family. But today, I will finish the story, because it has a redeeming ending and Carl Whitaker is not explained.

I believe now that when I was at that point when I thought I could do the unspeakable, I was starting to understand something about myself. In my limited career with music lessons, I have observed a pattern which makes a good analogy. In the beginning I copy the teacher, and as I get better I think I am playing like the teacher, but what is in fact happening is that the musician in me is starting to take shape. This pattern probably has some relevance for understanding therapeutic change. I understand why Carl and Muriel reacted to that phrase. Being admired is a polite way to be distanced, and being understood means you are in danger of becoming an image.

Anyway, I soon learned that I had it wrong. While I was standing around trying to understand Carl, he would move on to something else. The real problem was trying to keep up with him. I also became aware that what Carl was was a "somebody." And that I was not understanding him so much as deepening my appreciation of myself, of my own personhood. "The only you I know is me." The model might be in the way the music student turns into a musician.

Joseph Conrad is high on my list of favorite writers. I recently ran across a segment in his book, *The Mirror of the Sea*. When I read it I thought immediately

of Carl: In the segment of the book entitled "The Fine Art," he talks about ships' masters or sea captains. I am including it here because I think Carl would have liked the ideas, but also because it comments on something I cherished in Carl—he was a hard, inspired worker.

In his discussion of sea captains he had sailed with, Conrad says that there were certain men among them who set a standard of performance above the dead level of correct practice in a community. He notes there is something beyond—a higher point, a subtle and unmistakable touch of caring, love, pride, responsiveness, playfulness and investment beyond mere skill. There is an inspiration behind the work that makes the work like art. Maybe it is art.

I want to read a short paragraph from *The Mirror of the Sea*, in which Conrad, in his eloquent discussion of accomplished men, describes

a man who not only knows but *understands*—a thing (let me remark in passing) much rarer than one would expect because the sort of understanding I mean is inspired by love; and love, though in a sense it may be admitted to be stronger than death, is by no means so universal and so sure. In fact, love is rare—the love of men, of things, of ideas, the love of perfected skill. For love is the enemy of haste: it takes count of passing days, of men who pass away, of a fine art matured slowly in the course of years and doomed in a short time to pass away. . . . Love and regret go hand in hand in this world of changes swifter than the shifting of the clouds reflected in the mirror of the sea.

I see Carl in this passage, a friend, a partner. Our partnership and the loving which permeates it is an endless inspiration to me.

Thank you for letting me share with you these humble reflections on a man who I so dearly love, a deep partner in charting our way and sailing through some of the more fascinating passages of my life.

State University of New York
Health Science Center
750 E. Adams Street
Syracuse, NY 13210