AFTA Journal

I have a limited perspective on Carl Whitaker's life and work. Since he was first my therapist, then became my teacher and mentor, and remained throughout my long relationship with him a father surrogate, it is difficult for me to see him in anything but mythic terms. I am working on de-constructing the myth, but it's difficult to do.

In 1968 when I began seeing families with Carl while a psychology intern in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin, I was awed by what I saw: a muscular, often confrontive challenge to very complex and difficult families. Carl intercepted put-downs, pointed out double-binds, and was absolute death on what he called "pseudo-therapy." He was rigid about structure (the whole family all the time), moralistic about divorce (you can't every really get divorced if you have children), and fiercely devoted to exposing the family's truth and lies. Carl could sound like an old-fashioned moralist, yet he was always fomenting rebellion--turning the scapegoat into a hero, taking on the top dog, prodding the victim to stand up and fight, extolling the virtues of swapping roles and upsetting the apple cart. He fought with families in a way that was basically loving, and he could be alternately deeply involved and firmly detatched. In his detatched mode he valued and promoted insight, and he was brilliantly perceptive about the family. Often I saw a confused and

bewildered family gasp with surprise at his out-of-nowhere insights that went to the heart of their dilemmas.

In retrospect, I can see more clearly the heroic nature of this undertaking: making the family the patient, and challenging the whole notion of the family scapegoat. Of course Carl went way beyond making the nuclear family his patient; from early on he insisted that the family drag in grandparents and uncles and aunts, and several times he and I stood in the middle of wars between two families of origin whose vindictiveness awed and intimidated me. But not Carl: he waded in, challenging injustice, searching for the family's submerged hurt and caring. It was an historic moment in our field, and I got to see a tour de force performance at close range.

Like everyone else who worked with families, Carl had to reckon with the family's resistance to change, and he soon became more playful and coy and paradoxical, wondering why people would want to change a system of blaming that worked so well, prescribing and augmenting the family's symptoms until they complained that they didn't **want** them anymore, and doing a fancy conceptual dance that almost defied the family's efforts to get something straightforward from him. As others in the field began to create indirect ways to induce change in families, including use of the one-way mirror and the consulting team, I realized that Carl had developed just such a mechanism in his tongue-in-cheek maneuvering in and out of the family: now loving and

reassuring and involved, now distant and provocatively pessimistic about change.

But more than any other family therapy "pioneer" whose work I saw, Carl became deeply involved with the family; and he needed protection from the family's toxic processes and from the enormity of the pain that he saw. While his paradoxical stance provided some of that emotional protection (as the one-way mirror and other "strategic" tactics helped others be less vulnerable to the family's power), co-therapy was the mainstay of his emotional and conceptual support. Those of us who worked with him over time realized that in return for the support, the fathering, the subtle teaching which we received, he asked a lot from us. The complementarity in these co-therapy relationships varied: some of us were logical and organized in a way that liberated him to be more illogical and whimsical; some of us were maternal while he was paternal. But because of his strength, his co-therapists had enormous opportunities to experiment, and Carl not only could trade roles with us, allowing us to be confrontive when we were naturally timid, for example, but he would observe the whole process, rescue the family from our blunders, and in the sacred five minutes after the end of the appointment help us see what was happening and how we might vary or improve upon our efforts.

At the same time, as his co-therapists we felt the strong pull of his needs for support. Carl never trusted his ability to write about his work, for example, and a

number of us tried to help him do this, with varying degrees of success. When I wrote **The Family Crucible**, I was in the process of trying to say "goodby and thank you," and I asked for very little feedback from Carl; hence the book contains a very admiring but not very accurate picture of Carl's style. Dave Keith's writings with Carl come out of a more symmetrical relationship: their therapeutic styles are very similar, and their writings represent a deeper level of intellectual collaboration. Thankfully, Carl finally found his own voice in **Midnight Musings of a Family Therapist**, written with the help of Meg Ryan. Carl's awareness of death pushed him to speak out of his own experience; and the book is a treasure.

With two notable exceptions, I don't think any of his co-therapists managed true peership. Tom Malone, from Whitaker's Atlanta days, was such a peer; but it was his wife, Muriel, who shone forth with an emotional depth and power which matched his, especially in the "family reunions" which the two of the led together in Nashotah, and in the workshops which they did together later in Carl's life.

In recent years my own relationship with Carl was distant and troubled. When in 1978 at age 39 I found myself having to leave the man whom I owed too much, neither of us handled it well. He felt betrayed by my rebellious way of declaring my independence; I in turn felt deeply hurt by Carl. An old and painful story: the awkwardly separating mentor and protege. As I have described elsewhere, Carl and

I managed a cliff-hanger reunion in the last months of his life. I am so grateful that I got to say to him my appreciation for what he gave me, and that we each got to speak about our love for each other.

In the months since his death, I have grieved; I have also worked to see Carl more clearly. Since he emphasized so strongly the importance of the person of the therapist in the therapy process, and since Carl did not leave us a tightly organized system of therapy, it seems particularly important that we understand the person whom many of us admired and loved, but who also offended and puzzled some people.

Like many a parentified child--Carl was certainly the family hero; and his father died early, while he was in medical school--he had a huge sense of responsibility. He also identified with structure and authority; and many of us were drawn to that "strong father" presence. But he also had a long quarrel with social hierarchies and people-pleasing and considered therapy a counter-cultural, quasi-revolutionary enterprise. His own career demonstrates many instances of his being drawn to positions of authority (chairmanship of Psychiatry at Emory) and of taking stands against established hierarchies (the teaming between Carl and his faculty and the medical students they treated in two years of compulsory group therapy made an explosive mix at Emory). With families, he would take over the leadership of the family in sessions, then give it away, insisting that

the family take more and more initiative. In fact, some of the behavior which was labelled as "irrelevant" or "shocking" may have been a way to try to avoid some of the weight which fell upon his shoulders.

Carl was a person of powerful convictions, some of them conventional and at times rigid; and he had a kind of religious feeling about families--the sacredness of this little group with its powerful loyalties and its complex natural processes. He believed in the underlying drive for growth and health in families, and he thought of himself as at best a stimulus or catalyst. Carl also believed that the "magic" of therapy was in the interface between the family's drive for growth and the therapist's yearning for the same. The intricacy of the ways two families mixed up their scripts in marriage, or in the way therapists and family collided when working together, fascinated him. He once said to me, "Isn't this a good way to make a living? All this wonderful complexity; you can never get bored."

Of course like a lot of highly creative people, he did get bored. The family's inertia sometimes drove him to fall asleep, or to put a shoe on his head, or to carry on long monologues with delighted and mystified children, or to turn to his co-therapist and talk about infuriatingly unrelated subjects. When challenged, he would say, "If there were something going on here, I would pay attention." Often, he found ordinary language lacking and spoke mainly in metaphors. Once he said to a plain, Wisconsin farmer who

wanted to know how to help his schizophrenic son, "You could take a brace and bit and bore a hole in your son's head and crawl inside and cuddle him."

Once I thought I saw some of the origin of Carl's abhorrence of shut-down and deadness in families. He described a time when as a teenager he and his father had been working on a carpentry project on the farm in Upstate New York, and Carl hit his thumb with a hammer and said "Shit!" "I knew I had done something wrong, of course, because my father didn't speak to me for the rest of the day. Then at dinner he said quietly, 'It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't sounded so spontaneous.'" So Carl was determinedly and brilliantly spontaneous; and he was, I think, our field's Picasso. From bottle-feeding schizophrenic patients to arm-wrestling adolescents to exploding the denial in large extended families, every period of his work was highly original. Not always pretty, but always changing and full of life.

The only canvas large enough to contain his energy, finally, was the workshop, where he did a kind of between-the-lines therapy with the participants in which he told the same stories we had heard before, did a dazzling live interview, then philosophized about the normal family or the wisdom of craziness. The real message was for the therapist not to "settle" for technique or security, but to push the envelope in being a person, especially while you worked. Most of us had long ago given up trying to imitate him, but

this underlying message was liberating and empowering. He believed in the work being done by family therapists, and he cared about us. He wanted us to protect and nurture the sacred territory of our own personhood; and he kept plugging away across this country and others with his seemingly indefatigable missionary work until he had the first of several strokes. Then he hung on for a heroic year and a half through a number of near-dyings in order for many of us and especially for his large extended family to come and say goodby.

Carl almost became an ob-gyn, but in his residency the anesthesia machine exploded during a woman's voluntary hysterectomy, and his grief about that death pushed him toward psychiatry. I had planned to be a poet and English professor until my life fell apart in my early twenties and I met this tough, rather narcissistic character with the large hands, the owl-like eyes, and the enigmatic demeanor. I am grateful that fate led him to psychotherapy, that he found the anesthesia of human caring necessary, and that his patient was the wounded human family. Whatever he had done for work, a large group of people would be grieving him now; he was just that powerful a person. But I am glad that it is we who got the benefit, and who are sad that he is gone.

As we circle the wagons of our art against the impending battle with the bureaucrats and cost-cutters, we need as never before his impeterbable, determined and loving

belligerance. I hope we can keep hearing his voice, "Hang in there; don't let 'em get you down."

To Muriel,
with my love.
Gus