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Carl Whitaker: In memoriam

[Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, Jan 1996 by Connell, Gary M](#)

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Carl Whitaker's death evokes many memories and feelings about both the man and his unique brand of therapy. Carl was a seasoned professional who for several decades gave generously to the discipline of family therapy as he pushed himself to stay on the cutting edge of the field. Carl was a free associative spirit who was a master at integrating the dichotomies of living into his personhood.

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As Carl chronicled his development in *Midnight Musings of a Family Therapist* (1989), two issues became clear. First, Carl had a deep and enduring love for his family, especially his wife Muriel, who was his intimate partner in every aspect of their lives. One had only to be around the two of them to understand that their "we-ness" was the most important relationship in Carl's life. Secondly, he was an introspective man who was as thoughtful about his patients' lives as he was about his own. Carl seemed to stress pivotal points of health while looking for exceptions to pathology. For example, he described an old lady who had been sitting catatonic in her blue velvet chair for 15 years as a joy when she engaged in casual chit-chat. He did not focus on her catatonia but marveled at the times she was communicative. Carl searched for the humanness within us all rather than highlight the pathology. He was intrigued by what brings about change or exceptions

to the rule.

Carl had no introduction to psychodynamic therapy but still believed that transference "rules the world." His belief system was predicated on the importance of the mother-child relationship. "We've all been hypnotized by our mothers" and "mother knows best" are two well-known quips Carl presented and wrote about. The struggle for individuation, in which we are all engaged, Carl referred to as the interaction between the "I-ness" of the nonverbal infant and the drive to belong to a family; "We-ness" evolves from this experience. Personhood evolves out of the "I-ness" of breast feeding and the "We-ness" of learning to play peek-a-boo with mother (Whitaker & Connell, 1990). Carl believed that during the day, we each struggle to establish "We-ness"; our night life is a massive effort to live out our "I-ness." His book, *Roots of Psychotherapy* (1953), with Tom Malone, presents his early innovative ideas on the power of transference to facilitate the control and augmentation of joining and individuating in psychotherapy.

Carl spent 1 year of his early training devoted exclusively to play therapy. He loved it] Play and spontaneous primary process were the nucleus of life and therapy for Carl. He believed that spontaneity was the antidote to aloneness and a playful relationship added intimacy to life. One of the most obvious examples of Carl's playful ways was his use of a pattern he called "double-talk." Double-talk allowed him to move back and forth from being tender or amusing, cuddling, playful, or deadly serious. One never knew Carl's intentions. This ambiguity permitted him to be more open with others without binding them to his way of thinking. Carl was determined not to impose his views on others. Techniques of indirect communication, puzzling non sequiturs, nonreassurance, and double-talk were all techniques that Carl frequently employed to assert his view without imposing his beliefs (Whitaker, 1977). At times I was not sure how to take Carl, but there was always an understructure of caring.

Several years ago Carl and I were working on an article when suddenly he took out a scrap of paper and wrote a message to my oldest son, Chris, which he asked me to deliver. It read, "The statement on this side is true. Chris, don't ever let belief in your father fool you]" The other side of the paper read, "The sign on the other side is false. Chris, nuts to you] Carl." Carl appreciated the absurdities of life and valued "kindred spirits." When Chris read the note he smiled and appeared confused. It became a symbolic experience for us all, and Chris still has the note as a keepsake.

Although Carl liked being an elusive spirit and took great delight in Minuchin's statement that he was a "destroyer of crystallized form," he was consistent in his philosophy about people, his ideas on therapy, his use of therapeutic technique, and the importance of mentoring in the training process. Many of his ideas about human growth and development were generated by his understanding of the works of philosophers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Carl was not only a brilliant scholar but also a prolific reader. His existential roots shaped his belief in following a family's lead and not interfering with their natural processes of growth. Carl defined growth not just as the effort to develop more competence and security in duplicitous attachment to each other, but the full-bodied play of the individual daring to be the self he or she doubted. Carl maintained that a family had a "built in drive" to solve their own problems if the therapist could just "activate this potential." By serving as a "benchmark" (Keith, Connell, & Whitaker, 1991), the therapist can help a family get their bearings to follow their own map. Carl spent most of his adult professional life trying to teach others how to do this.

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