

SAYING HULLO AGAIN: REMEMBERING MICHAEL WHITE

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Michael was a very humble and unassuming person. I am quite sure wherever he is now watching over these proceedings that he would be very discomfited by the outpourings of shock, grief, and mourning over his death on the one hand and the reverence in which he has been held and tributes paid to him from Quito in Ecuador, to Seoul in South Korea, from Moscow in Russia, to Capetown in the Republic of South Africa. Michael's worst fear was of hagiographies—I remember when he told me how worried he was of such versions of his life; I had to go and look up "hagiography." I learned it was the literary genre to do with the lives of the saints. In fact, I suspect that out of respect for Michael, many of us deferred to his wishes for anonymity and only spoke of such matters in private or at least far away from Michael's hearing. I know I certainly was one of those but I expect there were many like me. He cringed in the face of what became a version of celebrity in the world of psychotherapy in which he came to be regarded as one of the most significant influences on his generation. I guesstimate the books he either coauthored or authored have sold well over 100,000 copies in 12 languages and once again I guesstimate well over 30 separate translations. Now that Michael is not here to censure us, I wanted to speak in the merest outlines of his life's work and do so by way of celebration and honor. No one I know was readier to honor others than Michael and he made the term "honoring" a catch phrase. Let me give you one of a thousand possible stories from our friendship. Michael was an extraordinary cyclist. His fierce determination was matched by his physical capabilities. After all, in his early 50s, Michael entered his first full triathlon. Michael came out of the water first swimming against 20-year-old semi-professionals. We would cycle up from sea level in Adelaide to the summit of Mt. Lofty—0 to 750 meters—taking over an hour and a half. Not surprisingly, I would finish some time after him and I mean some time. He would always be waiting, thrilled to see me as if I came in first. "Eppy" he would say, "you rode so well . . . slow and steady . . .

This contribution was a speech that David Epston delivered at 'Remembering Michael' at The Family Therapy Centre in Auckland, New Zealand on May 23rd, 2008; it was also read aloud by Suzanne Pregonson/Rick Maisel in a 'Remembering Michael White' ceremony in San Rafael, California. The Editor would like to thank David Epston for so graciously allowing his expressions about his long time friend and colleague, Michael White, to be published in the Journal of Systemic Therapies. David can be contacted at bicycle2@xtra.co.nz

I have just got to learn to ride like you do!” A stranger may have found such comments feigned or even preposterous but if you knew Michael well, you knew that he really meant it. He really wanted to learn to ride like I did, even if it would have handicapped him considerably in any time trial.

So tonight, I am going to speak without reference to Michael’s restraints on how he wished to stand to one side of his ingenuity and at times his wizardry. I remember too that when some colleagues and I at John F. Kennedy University—near Berkeley, California, where Michael and I both taught in the early to mid-90s—decided that his “body of published work” merited a doctorate and we, without informing him, proceeded to submit an application on his behalf. He did receive a Doctor of Human Letters (D.Litt.) in 1996. I was there that day and Michael, always expressing thanks to us, went through that day as if he had a sharp pebble in one or both of his sandals. To this day, I still am in two minds if we had done the right thing. I suspect Michael was just too kind to say anything to the contrary, given that we were acting on our good intentions.

But to my way of thinking, Michael was an amateur philosopher. I don’t mean amateur in the sense of amateur as a poor version of a professional but rather the older dictionary meaning of amateur—one who cultivates a thing as a pastime. It was always extraordinary how such an “amateur” led the world of psychotherapy, etc. into what John McLeod calls the post psychological, which he referred to thus: “to a greater or lesser degree they define therapy as primarily a social process than a psychological one . . . that they are seeing a historical and cultural shift in relation to the meaning and practice of therapy.”

I was taken by Michael’s sheer delight with those ideas that unsettled or troubled the taken for granted and allowed for ways to live and think otherwise than had been previously permissible or even conceivable given that such ideas had gained the status of a “truth.” First, he read the Iconoclast Gregory Bateson, but tired after a few years of translating that into his practice/thinking. But then he turned to Michel Foucault whose range of thought was vast beyond belief—who seemed able to turn just about everything upside down and if not upside down, at least to tilt that which had previously seemed so solid on to a precarious 90 degree angle. Michael caught the wave of postmodernism earlier than almost anyone else in the world of psychotherapy and the skillful surfer he was, he sailed to unknown seas on it, taking many of us along with him, such was the sheer pleasure he took in “deconstructing” the world around him. In other ways, his mind was like a posthole digger. His readings and re-readings of the middle Foucault—and each reading, Michael seemed to savour this more—were penetrating, always going deeper at the same time as the effects of his readings radiating out into his practice/teaching. What limited him was the time available for such a pursuit. This amateur cultivated his pastime late at night or on airplanes between teaching assignments around the world. I often wondered if Michael had far more time to cultivate such a pastime what that would have meant to Narrative Therapy. But for me, who was a fellow traveller, it was remarkable to watch, say, what Michael did over a de-

cade with Myerhoff's paper which I first gave him a copy of in 1983; or the book chapter of Foucault's, "Power and Knowledge," which I copied off for him in 1985. To meet him later on for discussions or to teach together, it was fascinating to witness the inexorable expansion of these ideas over that vast divide of abstract theory to practice.

I have always considered Michael to merge in himself the rare combination of practitionership and scholarship but always ensuring that his practice came ahead of his scholarship. I do not consider that theory made Michael but rather Michael's own clinical ingenuity exploited theory—they were merely tools for him to think further than his inventions had led him so far. There was always this backwards and forwards between his practice and his tools to think with. This radiated throughout his most recent and last book—*Maps of Narrative Practice* (2007), in which he took it upon himself to commentate on his own life as a practitioner-scholar. His clear intention was one that reflected his own modesty—that is to make his practice and the ideas that inform them as easily accessible as possible for us to appraise and if we seek to do so, to apprentice ourselves to. In his humility, he often left out the genius and at times wizardry all those who had the opportunity to sit in on more than a few meetings or watched his videotapes have witnessed. Have you ever watched a videotape of Michael's, mesmerized, like I have, and all of a sudden realized that the conversation had passed over some sort of bridge between despair and renewed hope and you wondered if you had lost consciousness for a split second because you hadn't noticed that happening? Has the coin of the "explicit" heads been turned over to reveal the "implicit" tails so quickly that, like me, you swear it was some sort of magic? Michael, in every workshop he ever taught and every book he wrote, did his darnedest to bequeath to us—his readers/students/workshop attendees—his practice/scholarship. He was generous to a fault. He tried to give away everything he had to each and every one of us who was willing to watch, listen or read. That was what made his last book—*Maps of Narrative Practice*—so significant to me. He used his "maps" to reveal which way he was going and why he might head in that direction, at the same time warning us that there were so many directions he may very well have headed in—or that you might head in.

Michael possessed a remarkable but gracious ease by which he could move between the large ideas of scholarship and the intimate and particular ideas of practice. Having known Michael for 27 years, I think few in our field can go from what seems to be one extreme to another without a lot of border stops in between. At each border stop, many others I know of get heavily taxed passing through each stop. By the time, say, the scholar reaches his/her practice they seemingly have been so depleted, it is often hard to see much connection between the two. At times, the theory seems like sheer window-dressing. Michael, with only a few speed bumps to slow him down, travelled from one domain to the other seemingly unimpeded. I have always found this breathtaking and a testament to the conjunction of a remarkable spirit merging with an equally remarkable scholar-

ship. In his last book, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (2007), they were so woven together as to appear seamless. That is far from easy to achieve.

Either reading one of his transcripts or watching a videotaped meeting—which Michael considered to be an ethical responsibility to continually make available, to expose his practice and the ideas that informed it to the widest critique—I want you to imagine how taxing this must have been for such a modest person. But Michael lived by a quote of Foucault's: "we know what we do, we think we know what we think, but do we know what what we do does." Michael authorized his clients and the communities that petitioned him to have the first judgement; his professional colleagues came second. Still, he was willing to allow us to go to the very heart of his practice and judge for ourselves. You could almost palpably feel the relish with which Michael met the people who consulted him and how they in turn savoured those meetings. It brought it home to me how enriching this work we do is to our lives—the "two-way street" that Michael unashamedly so often spoke about. Michael always assumed that we were the lucky ones and I know he certainly considered himself to have always been the lucky one in such meetings. In fact, I think Michael looked up to those he met.

Let me read you a quote from the philosopher Phillip Caputo in a book chapter about Michel Foucault in which he guesses what kind of therapist Foucault might have been, given that he had no explicit therapeutic intentions whatsoever throughout his philosophical career, but remember his first degree was in psychology and he did an internship in a public psychiatric institution in the 1950s in France.

He writes: "Such a therapy" (if Foucault invented one that is) "does not look at the mad as patients in the sense of objects of medical knowledge but as patients—as ones who suffer greatly—who suffer from their knowledge. Such a patient would not be an object of knowledge but an author or subject of knowledge, one from whom we have something to learn."

Caputo went on to surmise that for Foucault as a therapist "the healing gesture meant to heal this suffering is not intended to explain it away or fill in the abyss but simply to affirm that they are not alone, that our common madness is a matter of degree, that we are all siblings in the 'same night of truth.' The healing gesture is not to explain madness if that means to explain it away but to recognize it as a common fate, to affirm our community and solidarity."

Compare this to my abstract of a quote from Michael in 1993 which was so telling about why he did what he has done.

And what of solidarity? I am thinking of a solidarity that is constructed by therapists who refuse to draw a sharp distinction between their lives and the lives of others, who refuse to marginalize those persons who seek help, by therapists who are constantly confronting the fact that if faced with the circumstances such that provide the context of troubles of others, they just might not be doing nearly as well themselves.

In 1981, I was asked to introduce Michael and his colleagues at a workshop on their work with people having psychotic experiences at the 2nd Australian Fam-

ily Therapy Conference in his home town of Adelaide. I recall sitting there stunned throughout. After all, several years before I had spent two years of a masters degree in the United Kingdom reading everything there was written at the time about family therapy. Luckily for me, there wasn't that much to read in those days. I recall it dawning upon me that I was witnessing the "launching" of a new school of family therapy. I don't quite know what possessed me but I insisted on standing up afterwards and formally announcing what seemed to me to be an ineluctable conclusion. That a new school of family therapy had been "born" and we had all witnessed that. In 1983, after teaching together at the 4th Australian Conference in Brisbane, Michael, Cheryl, and I had dinner together afterwards. I don't recall how the conversation came up but Michael and I decided to become "brothers." This was pre-AIDS so one of them suggested blood brotherhood. I had to beg off because I faint at the sight of anyone's blood, especially my own. But we decided to make our ideas and practice common property and vowed that we would never become rivals. We did what we said we would do all these years right up until he died. In fact, we had made another vow late last year—one we can no longer keep—that we would meet a fortnight ago in Adelaide to sit down and plan our next project and book which undoubtedly would have kept us joyfully busy well into our respective dotages. I will always remember Michael as my brother and a remarkable man.

With that in mind, I want to remind you of the luckiest breaks in the history of Narrative Therapy. In the late 1970s, Michael published a paper in the prestigious journal *Family Process*, reporting on his work with the problem of anorexia at the children's hospital in Adelaide where he worked. The advisory editor (Chris Beels) informed me some years ago that it was the first paper ever published showing positive results with the problem of anorexia. Soon after that, the Deputy Director of Psychiatry obviously heard about this and forbade Michael from meeting with families in which there was a young person diagnosed with anorexia because he was a social worker and was unfit for the task which should be restricted to more august medical and psychiatric practitioners. Michael refused to adhere to this edict and continued to meet with these families and they with him. The next step the Deputy Director took was to remove all the chairs from Michael's room. Michael and the families merely continued, now sitting on the floor. Then the Deputy Director imposed on Michael what I gather he assumed would drive him into some other form of employment, rather smartly, that from then on, he would be allowed only to meet with young people who had failed 2-year-long psychoanalytic treatments for the problem of encopresis or in common parlance, soiling. This was truly dirty work. Little did the Deputy Director know he had challenged Michael in the same way Foucault must have been challenged by what he had witnessed in a public psychiatric institution. Here Michael would be required to turn the tables on conventional psychiatric wisdom and in doing so invent externalizing conversations and in turn narrative therapy. I know Michael once told me he had a 99% success rate in an average of 4 meetings. So much so that he felt

obliged, perhaps with his tongue in his literary cheek, to submit these results as having to do with pseudo-encopresis because if it was true encopresis, such claims to these results would have had to have been the ravings of a lunatic. Michael turned the problem of soiling into the object of everyone's scrutiny and called into question the very cultural construction of a problem, something so taken for granted that at first this was met with disbelief in some quarters, great relief in others. Michael allowed his work and their outcomes to form the critique of that which he so opposed—the turning of people into problems and by doing so, to degrade them, to look down on them and finally to dismiss them. In his work at Glenside, a state psychiatric hospital where he worked for many years part-time, his team weighed the files of the candidates for their service. If they weighed 2 kilos or more, they welcomed them to their service. He would always add: “but we would never read them.”

I believe what Michael most objected to and why he felt such a kinship with Foucault was the prevailing professional ways of seeing those who sought their help with the so-called gaze. The feminist scholar, Marilyn Frye, refers to this as the “arrogant eye,” a gaze that takes the professional's own standpoint as central, their opinions, desires and projects as the salient ones, their experience and understanding as what is the case. The arrogant eye, she writes, allows them to absorb the identities of others into their own. From the point of view of the arrogant eye, insofar as patients exist, they exist for the professional. They are dismissed and degraded in the light of such an eye. Frye asserts that the loving eye knows the independence of the other. It is an eye of one who knows that to see the seen, one must consult something other than one's own will and interests. Under the “loving eye,” people who lay claim to certain kinds of knowledges aren't unauthorized or deligitimated because they are not regarded to be in a position to know. The loving eye confers social standing on those who have been dismissed and degraded by the arrogant eye. I have no doubt that Michael looked upon everyone with what Frye referred to as a loving eye. To fall under Michael's loving gaze you felt the utmost in respectworthiness, which was in absolute contrast to the blameworthiness of so many of the psychological and psychiatric gazes. Michael had an intimitable voice and quaint vocabulary that bent the English language at times almost to its breaking point. He could be said to have willingly misused language to create new language. There are so many of his linguistic inventions that haven't made the Oxford English dictionary yet but they will. My favorite is “knowledged.” I am sure many of us have adopted some of these Whiteisms to refresh our own thinking perhaps even without knowing it. It is through his poetic vocabularies that you most easily appreciate both the novelty and subtlety of his thought and his intention to turn language inside out—to expose how under-politicized language is.

Michael's loving eye had a tongue that constantly misused language without which according to the philosopher Feyerabend, “There can be no discovery.” Michael certainly had more than his fair share of discoveries. At times, the eccen-

tric ways he put these thoughts into words seemed so incandescent compared to how opaque many of his sources were. He illuminated ideas and the light that was reflected back allowed many of us to go where we might otherwise have found it hard going. To see how Michael's mind, which was as unrelenting as rust, worked, I know I would watch for the slight shifts in his vocabulary which told me what I was seeking. Michael would often remonstrate with me when I would attend his workshops at conferences: "Why are you here? You know all this? You have heard it before!" I would reply: "Every time you say it differently and that is what I am interested in hearing—the slight shifts in your vocabulary." But more generally, Michael illuminated and cleared a swath in the "fields" of social work, psychology, psychiatry, etc. for many of us to ply our avocations. If I have been told by hundreds that "if it wasn't for Narrative Therapy, I would have had to leave my profession for some other kind of work," Michael must have heard this so many more times than that.

Michael was inspirational in this regard, but never appealing to sentimental sermonizing on the one hand or the polemical on the other. He inspired by his practice which was a counter-practice to that which he was critiquing and, as such, his critiques were always unassuming in their manner and implicit. They were never empty or uninformed. He demanded of himself that he should offer clear plans of what is to be done and how to do it.

There is so much to say about and thank Michael for and this is a feeble attempt.

I was teaching in Bogotá, Colombia when I received the news that Michael had perished. I persisted with this dedicating that teaching as a tribute to Michael. On the last of the four days, Mariana Saenz, waiting until everyone else had left, approached me and told me how desperately sad she was about Michael's death and began to sob inconsolably, asking what could she do on his behalf. I advised her of the Dulwich Centre website that had been set up. She continued sobbing. I quietly asked her: "Did you meet Michael when he taught here in Bogotá six years ago?" "No," she replied. "Have you read his books?" "No," she replied again. I was running out of options here but went on to ask: "Did you or are you studying him in your training?" "No," she replied. "How did you know him?" I finally asked. She replied: "Through your stories about him." I had never thought of that as I had never considered I would be telling posthumous stories about Michael. But now I am and so can you. This will assist all of us to keep Michael well and truly alive in our lives and in our work in the same way he was so alive in his life and his work.

I wanted to end this by a song. This song was written and sung by Margarita Boom from Cancún, Mexico. She did so at my request when Narrative Therapy was invited by the Cuban Psychiatric Association and Cuban Social Work Association to introduce Narrative Therapy to Cuba. We refused to comply unless they would in return introduce us to what they chose to refer to as "Cuban Social Programs." This conference, sponsored by the World Psychiatric Association

and the International Federation of Social Work, entitled: “The Spirit of Community: Narrative Therapy and Cuban Social Programs” was held in early January, 2007 in Habana. Margarita’s song speaks to how we hoped to meet them and embodies for me the “spirit” of Narrative Therapy—that “loving eye” I referred to by which Michael looked to those he met throughout the course of his work and his life.

HERMANO DEL SOL Y TIEMPO

Deja que estreche tu historia
y se llenen mis manos
de nuevos sentidos,
que nunca habia visto,
que nunca habian sido,
que no habia podido
entender sin tu trino,
que tienen tu nombre
que traza un camino.

Deja que lleve conmigo
un pedazo de tiempo
compartido
y el sabor a tibieza
que deja el amigo.

Hermano de sol y tiempo
que importa el color del viento!
Nos une un sabor a sueño.

A mano con mano
Ir sosteniendo
un pedazo,
un cachito de mundo donde se permita
andar a tu paso,
sentir lo que sientes,
y aunque diferente,
cantar con tu canto.

Deja que tome tu conciencia
y me lleve de vuelta
la certeza
que siendo distintos,
somos parecidos

Que el corazon late
los mismos latidos,
pero que tu forma
nventa
otro ritmo

Deja que aprenda tu musica
y enriquezca mi mundo
con tu mirada
y tenga en tu alma
una nueva morada.

Hermano el so y tiempo
que importa el color del viento!
Nos une un sabor a sueno

BROTHER OF THE SUN AND OF TIME

Let me hold your story
and fill my hands
with new sensations
that I've never seen before

which have never existed
which I couldn't have understood
without your song
They bear your name
and trace out a road.

Let me take with me
a piece of our
time together
and savour the warmth
a friend leaves behind.

Brother of the sun and of time
who cares what colour the wind is?
We are joined by the taste of a
dream

Of being hand in hand
holding
a small piece,
a bit of a world

where you are allowed
to walk at your own pace
to feel what you feel
and, although different,
to sing your own song.

Let me take your conscience
and leave taking with me
the certainty
that although we are different
we're alike

That the heart beats
to the same beat
but your form
creates a new rhythm

Let me learn your music
and enrich my world
with the look of your eyes
and to find in your soul
a new home.

Brother of the sun and of time
who cares what colour the wind is?
We are joined by the taste of a
dream.

—Margarita Boom, Cancún, Mexico