

Remembering Michael White **By David Epston**

Michael was a very humble and unassuming person. I am quite sure wherever he is now watching over these proceedings 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 Cape town in the Republic of South Africa. Michael's worst fear was of hagiographies. I remember when he told me how worried about this he was, I had to go and look up the word. It is the literary genre to do with the lives of the saints I learned. 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 co-authored or authored have sold well over 100,000 copies in 11 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 honour. No one I know was readier to honour others than Michael and made 'honoring' a catchphrase.

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 came out of the water in his first full triathlon first, swimming against semi-professional 20 year olds. We would cycle up from sea level in Adelaide to the summit of Mt Lofty- from sea level to 750 metres 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 for me thrilled to see me as if I come in first. "Eppy," he would say, "You rode so well...slow and steady...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 in other ways 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 D.Litt or Doctor of Humane Letters 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. Michael was 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 "a greater or lesser degree they define therapy as primarily a social process than a psychological one...that we 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 and found 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 postmoderism earlier than 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 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 had far more time to cultivate such a pastime what that would have meant for narrative therapy.

But for me, who was a fellow traveller, it was remarkable to watch say

what Michael did over a decade 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 xeroxed off and posted to 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 video-tape of Michael's, mesmerized like I have been, and all of 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 darndest 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(2007) - 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 are 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 grand and vast 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 that 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 scholarship. 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, Michael considered it to be an ethical responsibility to continually make available and .to expose his practice or the ideas that informed it to the widest critique. I want you to imagine how hard 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 judgment; 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 mentioned so often. 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 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 re 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 family therapy conference in his hometown of Adelaide. I recall sitting there stunned throughout. After all, I had spent two years of a master's degree reading everything written at the time about family therapy several years before. 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 conference, Michael, Cheryl and I had dinner together afterwards.. I don't know how the conversation came up but Michael and I decided to become 'brothers'. This was pre-Aids so one of them suggested a 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 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 in to 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 informed me some years ago that it was the very first paper ever published showing positive results with the problem

of anorexia.

Soon after that, the Deputy Director of Psychiatry 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(4.4 pounds) or more, they welcomed such candidates to their service. He would always add, "But we would never read them; we just weighed 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-'the 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', in so far 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 de-legitimated 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 inimitable 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 favourite is 'knowledged.' I am sure we have all adopted some of these White-isms perhaps even without knowing it to refresh our own thinking. 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 eccentric ways he put this 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 say to me- "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'm interesting in hearing." But more in general, 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 other kind of work', Michael must have heard this so many more times than that.

Michael was inspirational in this regard, but never appealing too sentiment- sermonizing on the one hand or the polemical on the other.

He inspired by his practice which was an alternative to that which he was critiquing and, as such, his critiques were always unassuming in their manner. They were never empty or uninformed. He demanded of himself that he should offer clear, 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 Bogota, Colombia when I received the news that Michael had perished. I persisted with this dedicating the teaching as a tribute to Michael. On my last of the 4 days, Mariana Selas, 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 asked her, "Did you meet Michael when he taught here in Bogota 6 years ago?" "No," she replied. "Have you read his books?" "No", she replied. 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 yet again. "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 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 with a song. This song was written and sung by Margarita Boom from 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 turn 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. 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 through 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 habria 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 permite
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 corazón late
los mismos latidos,
pero que tu forma
nueva
otro ritmo

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

Hermano del sol y tiempo

que importa el color del viento!
Nos une un sabor a sueño

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.