

Jennifer Freeman Remembers Michael Searle

Michael contributed as an incredibly gifted Marriage and Family Therapist, well-loved teacher, supervisor, and organizer in the Bay Area for almost thirty years.

On the way to our last visit with Mike, Dean and I called to see if he wanted anything, Oh, just a White Tail Ale he said. We found Mike in good spirits as we have through virtually every encounter over the past decades. We poured a measure to cheer with. He wanted to talk to us about his kids and then the pleasure he took in his calling. How happy he was, to be able to convey to his daughters that one's vocation could be an endless source of interest and joy. He felt confident that as they trusted in and followed their interests, Kyla, Nora and Gemma's calling would find them as his had found him.

He told us what we could plainly see working all these years as practice partners- that he started out each day with a sense of anticipation and enthusiasm for his meetings with the people he was lucky enough to work with.

I told Mike I felt thankful that even when I didn't see much of him through the day I could salute him across the hall knowing he was having such a fine time collaborating with people to good purpose. A great camaraderie! One that I know so many people shared with Mike in all his interests from banjo to bike! Many colleagues appreciated Mike's sense of community mindedness, rooted in the great love and strength of his family.

It's simply overwhelming to acknowledge all the colleagues beloved to and by Mike, you have stories to tell about your extraordinary relationships with him. Please know you are all interwoven in this brief story of decades of lived experience.

Mike worked at Fort Help, a San Francisco non-profit agency that offered counseling to under-served populations, and at the San Francisco Family Violence Project. Then, from a base

of Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology, Mike encountered Narrative Therapy from down under in the late 1980's, and found an immediate affinity with these ideas and practices—He could not have been more ideally matched, and he joyfully rode the breaking wave of it in the States. Rather than focusing on pathology, he found Narrative practice to open hope and possibility in the shaping of people's stories to more fully reflect and create lived experience. Did Mike find Narrative therapy or did it find him? In his own words, "if we did not encounter Narrative, we would have had to invent it."

Mike formed a narrative study group with Berkeley colleagues which lasted many years. He quickly became a contributor in the area, teaching Marriage and Family Therapy students at John F. Kennedy University. His efforts made JFK a center for this approach. He led the way, introducing innovative family therapy ideas and techniques, developing an Advanced Family Therapy program at the JFKU Counseling Center. Mike had a special interest in Narrative and Spirituality with a focus on Buddhism which he co-presented at the International Narrative Therapy Conference in Vancouver. In Mike's words spoken there. Conduct is what people remember. ... what you do is most representative of what you believe and what you have chosen to practice. Love is the generative force for effective therapy...love is the context for reason not the other way around. Belief gives a shape and direction to therapy. Belief allows us to remember that love can be evoked even when it is not apparent.

Mike also encountered the "Just Therapy" work of the Family Center of Lower Hutt, New Zealand, which brings social justice into central play in therapy and extends into political activism. He threw himself into efforts to support and further this work. Mike is beloved to many of the innovators of these approaches that have so influenced our field. A dear friend from New Zealand said the other day while conveying the love and sympathy of the Family Center that he found Mike "a ball of energy and life, such a thoughtful and sensitive man".

How about Mike's lopsided humor and enthusiasm! At our last meeting he kinda winked and said " we had so much fun and got away with it! " Here's another earlier image of him, grinning ear to ear, practically dancing with enthusiasm in the hallway, declaring that he had just had an entire meeting with a family where the problem evaporated in talk of better ideas to live by. Another meeting of the kind he called "Problem free therapy".

In the field we knew Mike as a quintessential collaborator who defined unconditional positive regard in his very being. Mike loved his collaborations with his clients, and people felt his love. He shared and spread the love of these ideas to people he supervised and consulted with. He saw the best in people and connected with their hopes and aspirations. Another office mate was speaking yesterday about Mike's intensity of spirit. In his words, "There was gentle fierceness about him, not just a belief, but a deep conviction that people could and would move their lives forward in preferred ways. Challenges and obstacles never intimidated him, either those he faced in his own life or those his client's or supervisees encountered. He wore his faith like a second skin, and he banished fear from his realm." Mike told us two days before he passed that he was open to all the possibilities.

As a testament to how sustaining his meetings with people were, Mike chose to work throughout his illness and these conversations buoyed his spirits and sense of purpose. He worked up to 10 days before he died. Mike shared with us his hope to call people, not out of obligation, but because he cared so deeply and wanted to speak with each and every one personally. When that became impossible, he dictated a letter. On the way home I said to Dean "Mike's a fool for hope, and I love that about him."

Mind you for all of this going on in his practice, it's hard for us to recall a conversation that did not include an enthusiastic, detailed story about his kids or the joys of parenthood and

marriage to Julie.

At the last of the meeting with Mike, past stories, fears, a tear, jokes, and plans to meet later, he raised his glass to toast again, “cheers”. He will be sorely missed. Mike traveled light through life leaving vibrant ideas, vital imprints and inspiration in our hearts. Cheers to Mike’s calling.

Sang spontaneously “for he’s a jolly good fellow and so say all of us.”

Today is a momentous day for the Narrative/social justice community. It is the day we celebrate and mourn the passing of two Michaels. Michael White, a friend of Mike’s, and co-innovator of Narrative therapy, passed away early today. I invite us to take a minute to breathe with the great goodness, love, and merit of these two men and their life’s work, to offer and dedicate it to the wellbeing and freedom of all sentient beings on this beautiful planet of ours.