



# Michael White in memoriam

By Allan Holmgren, DISPUK Denmark.

Michael White died late Friday the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2008. He had been teaching, giving a workshop in San Diego, Monday the 31<sup>st</sup>. He ended the workshop by saying that time was running out and that he was running out of words – that he had no more words to say. This symbolic prediction, which was ironically meant, turned out to be prophetic.

After the workshop he went to the gym and exercised as he used to do and as he loved. He was the person of his age who was the most fitted that I know of. He practised and was a member of a Triathlon club back home in Adelaide.

At the dinner with John Winslade, Lorraine Hedtge, Gerald Monk and others he talked about his daughter, who had just got married to her partner; he talked about his new life with his new girlfriend Sarah Walthers from Birmingham., England, with whom he planned to start a new life in the old house in Adelaide that he was about to rebuild. He talked the new centre that had founded in Adelaide, Adelaide Narrative Therapy Centre, and he talked about that he wanted to travel less – only for three months a year. It seemed that he was a happy man with all aspects of his life.

Suddenly he coughed as if he had got something from his drink in the wrong neck. He lost consciousness and was immediately given first aid before he was taken to an intensive care unit at a hospital nearby.

John Winslade called me late Tuesday evening (European time) the 1<sup>st</sup> of April and told me the sad news. Maggie Carey, one of Michaels associated from his new centre were with us teaching a group that Michael was supposed to teach in October this year had also got the news from Australia. We were both in a kind of chock.

Michael Whites sister, brother, daughter and girlfriend came to the hospital Wednesday and Thursday. Friday the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, local West coast time, the doctors turned off the machines that had kept Michael alive.

He was cremated in USA. His ash was send to Adelaide where there was a ceremony for the family Wednesday the 16<sup>th</sup> and a public ceremony in a church in Adelaide, where about 300 people were gathered to tell stories about Michaels importance and

contribution to peoples life, and hear some of Michaels favourite music – the last piece was Salt of the Earth with the Rolling Stones from the album called Beggars Banquet, Maggie Carey wrote to me in a lovely letter that can be read in full length at [www.dispuk.dk](http://www.dispuk.dk).

Michael Whites contribution to the field was enormous and cannot be overestimated. His brilliant creativity could be seen in his early work from the late 70<sup>th</sup>s and the beginning of the 80<sup>th</sup>s about externalising conversations, anorexia nervosa and in general in his inspiration from and practical of the work of Foucault and his ideas about modern power. Modern power is the normalising judgement that we all are subject to, and which creates us as subjects. Foucault played on the double meaning of the word subject – both subject to and subject of. One of Michaels basic ideas was that there is always a response from a person no matter how hard or unfair or traumatic this persons life has been. And it is in the response we find traces of subordinate stories; which are stories that have lived in the shadow of dominating stories with thin conclusions about the persons identity. If a person tells a story about a problem, then this person must have some experiences that life can be different. It is these differences that it is the therapist's job to listen for – “there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in,” as Leonhard Cohen writes. The response that people give to anything is an expression of something, of an intention.

It is also Michael Whites big contribution to the therapy world that he has opened our eyes for the importance of looking for the intentionality, a concept originally from the world of phenomenology but taken up by Jerome Bruner among others. It was through the inspiration from Jerome Bruner that Michael White and David Epston decided to call their approach to therapy for *Narrative Therapy*. Michael did never like the systems metaphor that most family therapy training was informed by. His position against the systems metaphor gave him many enemies in the family therapy world. I remember one time at a conference in San Remo, Italy, where Michael was presenting a paper at the plenary session and many of the participants walked out in protest because he had the courage and dared to challenge the systems metaphor in family Therapy. This was in 1992. Many things have changed since then.

Some people have criticized Michael White and narrative therapy for being individualistic. Nothing could be more wrong. Michael just declared that he was not a familyist, because “the family” is just a societal institution produced under specific historical circumstances. Michael was probably much more political in his approach to therapy and to community work than any other family therapist I have met. He often spoke of his work as being political with a small “p”, assisting persons to find their own way, never being moral, never



evaluating people, never setting up standards but always maintaining a fascination, an attraction and a living curiosity to other peoples lives always decentering himself. I have participated in many sessions with Michael as an outsiderwitness to the families stories. It has always been like being part of an artistic, of a magic process. I have even had the opportunity myself to be interviewed by Michael in 2002 when I had a difficult time in my life. It has changed my life profoundly.

Michael was fond of maps. He used the metaphors of territory, landscape and of movement. He developed several different maps that therapists could use as guidelines in their work with persons and witnesses to the therapeutic process. He was inspired by the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff to develop the outsiderwitness practice which is a much more personal and with less power positions built in than the reflecting team response where the professionals only speak about the clients. In the outsiderwitness team response the professionals, the audience, speak about themselves as persons and not as professionals. Michael often spoke about that this was the most efficient therapeutic "tool" he knew of.

The world of therapy has lost its most creative genius and theoretical consistent person since Milton Ericsson.

Michael White would have turned sixty next September.