

A Tribute to Michael White

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It is very sad that Michael White, a talented friend and mentor to many of us in the therapeutic community, passed away early in April of this year at such a young age, before reaching 60. Numerous people around the globe have wept and weighed the loss as they have communicated across the internet and through an amazing array of spontaneous memorial services. We hosted one such event at the Family Centre and had the privilege of joining another in Vancouver, where we happened to be working at the time.

Michael was enjoying dinner with friends after teaching all day in a workshop in San Diego, when he was suddenly struck down by a massive heart attack. Friends tried to resuscitate him as they waited for an ambulance, but to no avail, and he later died in hospital. Family members were able to join him before he passed away. It was a shock to everyone.

Michael was one of the world's great therapists. I am not exaggerating. He was a master of change and liberation for individuals, couples, and families all over the world. He cleverly undermined the psychiatric hegemony in Australia and in many other countries by redefining "the patient," so that rather than being seen as an object of treatment, he or she was understood as a person with a rich history, and by redefining the therapist as an honoured guest in a client's life, whose task was to help re-author new chapters of self-determining hope.

As the founder, and co-founder with David Epston, of narrative therapy, Michael's international legacy in the helping professions is without parallel in Australia and New Zealand. He was a practitioner, teacher, and theoretician, all in one. He was also a fearless advocate of people's resilience and a sharp critic of "the establishment" in mental health.

Dear Michael had a soft spot for New Zealand and New Zealanders, although he wasn't above ribbing us, like lots of his compatriots. He taught many in this country, and inspired many more to cross the ditch and join his workshops and the Dulwich Conferences in Adelaide. I have met countless Kiwis whose orientation and compassion in counselling and therapy were nurtured and, in some cases, transformed by him. His

writing was published most often by Dulwich, and we owe a great debt of gratitude to Cheryl White and David Denborough for capturing and promoting his lines, and the many other articles inspired by narrative therapy. These remain a potent legacy of his intellectual contribution and skill.

Life for Michael was not all work, though. He had a pilot's licence and loved to fly. He flew many of us around different parts of Australia. I chose the vineyards in Coonawarra once, and we had a heap of fun trying to find the tiny landing strip among the rows of vines. I became a little hysterical when, after numerous circles of the area, I thought he was going to attempt a landing among those precious grapes, but he was just rarking me up [Eds: "playing a joke on me"]. He was always obscenely fit, to the extent that it was embarrassing to go swimming with him because he left you so far behind in the pool. I don't mind it with other people, but he sort of knew we Kiwis are a little sensitive about Ozzie sporting prowess!

It is sad, but nevertheless true, that although many others will inspire us in the rich world of counselling and therapy, no one will replace the unique and original contribution this talented man offered so generously and so consistently. A very large eucalyptus has fallen indeed, and the thump has been felt in many continents.

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