

# REMEMBERING MICHAEL WHITE

By Angel Yuen, MSW RSW

*Michael White was world renowned as the originator of narrative therapy. One year ago while in a restaurant in San Diego, California he suffered sudden heart failure and sadly died days later on April 5<sup>th</sup> 2008. He was fifty-nine years old. The following paper was recently written for the Michael White Archive in the first anniversary of his death. The archive includes the many legacies which honour Michael's work and rich contributions to the field of therapy. I was encouraged by a few school social work colleagues to submit this piece to the OASW SSWC newsletter. It is reprinted here with permission from Dulwich Centre Publications.*



I remember fondly my very first visit to Adelaide Australia in 2004 for the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Summer School of Narrative Practice. It was sunny and the weather balmy as we gathered under a tent in the car park of the Dulwich Centre listening to the opening keynote presented by Michael White which was entitled "Turning Points in Therapy." Partway through his keynote Michael began to share a story about a boy referred to him who had been diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder. He then proceeded to list some of the traits of O.D.D. After reading through a few of the categories he paused looking up from his notes at the podium to ask the audience... "How many of you here would be eligible for this diagnosis?" Many softly chuckled, and gradually quite a number of hands were raised. More seriously he went further to say "You can imagine that a boy given this disorder might not be entirely enthusiastic

to meet with me about it". Shortly after Michael died last year I found myself back in time sitting under the tent at the Dulwich Centre in the warm summer heat and remembering his story of a boy labelled with O.D.D. The memory returned while sitting in a school conference meeting where a woman was waiting to hear the results of her son's academic and psychological testing. The results were delivered... "*Your son has O.D.D. which stands for Oppositional Defiant Disorder.*" The traits of O.D.D. were then listed to her and linked to her son's ongoing open defiance with authority, acts of refusal to abide by school rules and his continual opposition in class. While she was surrounded by a number of school professionals at the conference table the mother had no words to respond to the question "Do you have any questions?" In what then felt like a full minute of silence (but was probably a mere few seconds) I was aware of

my tense breathing and heart sinking. Yet somehow a calm and poised voice managed to come out to ask the mother some questions about her own knowledge (and expertise) of her child: "Do you see this at home?" "What is it like for you to hear this diagnosis?" "Does it fit with your experience of your son or are there times when you do not see opposition?" From this line of enquiry the conversation shifted to opening space to learning about the alternative knowledges (and stories) that stood outside what O.D.D. had to say about her son.

Fourteen years ago in a significant interview regarding 'psychotic experience and discourse' Michael commented on the theory of pathology:

*(Continued on page 9)*

## REMEMBERING ...

*(Continued from Page 9)*

*The word makes me wince! When I hear it, I think about the spectacular success of clinical medicine in the objectification of persons and of their bodies, and the extent to which the pathologising of persons is the most common and taken-for-granted practice in the mental health/welfare disciplines, and the central and most major achievement of the psychologies.* (White, M. Psychotic Experience and discourse. In White, M, *Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews and Essays* (pp. 112-154). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1995, p. 112).

In the beginning years of my narrative journey I found these thoughts immensely helpful. To this day I continue to value and considerably appreciate Michael's adamant questioning and challenging of the ubiquitous pathologising practices and deficit descriptions that have the ability to rob people of hope and to leave many feeling less-than. More invaluable though was his enormous and inspirational influence of developing a number of respectful, collaborative, innovative and effective practices. Over several years Michael guided us with detailed, thought-



ful, and delicate skill and hope in the re-authoring of lives and identities where people's voices could be enlivened about the preferred knowledge and stories of their own lives.

Today as the sea of pathology remains unending and now with even more sophisticated tools to categorize and interpret people's lives, it is Michael's words and images such as the gathering under the tent that sustain me. I'm not quite certain of the meaning of each person's soft chuckling back a few years ago in response to Michael's question at the summer school. But for me the moment somehow seemed emblematic of a collective resistance and 'opposition' to the pathologising of people's lives. Since then it has also left me thinking that if so many

practitioners in one room could be eligible for an O.D.D. diagnosis and disorder, that perhaps we were also joined together in implicitly questioning just what a 'disorder' is.

Michael often talked about linking lives through shared purposes. In the poignant anniversary of his death many of us hold dear the gift of the spirit of his work and ideas that continue to link our lives through a shared commitment of knowing that in the face of the ever-present mountain of disorders that there will always be sparkling stories of hopes, creativity, skills, competence, passions, values...and so much more!

*Angel Yuen is a part-time school social worker for the Toronto District School Board and also faculty member for the Narrative Therapy Centre of Toronto.*

[angel.yuen@tdsb.on.ca](mailto:angel.yuen@tdsb.on.ca)