

OBITUARY

W. E. "Buzz" O'Connell

Walter E. "Buzz" O'Connell was an active, innovative, and productive pioneer in the art and science of clinical psychology. He was an incarnation of the ideal of that helping profession, the scientist-practitioner. As a psychotherapist, he introduced and refined as many as one hundred concepts and techniques for the theory and practice of positive inner and outer life style changes. In the process of over fifty years of ultimate concern for the human condition, he treated over one thousand families and ten thousand patients, both private and hospitalized clients. Seven thousand others participated in college courses and weekend workshops on the taboo topic of death and dying. Always one to illustrate the holistic logic of "Both...And" rather than the separating "Either...Or," Buzz, at the same time, researched and practiced the sense of humor, another taboo subject of our time. Dr. O'Connell, always opposed to inauthentic suffering and mindless waste, wove his research and clinical findings into his humanistic-depth psychology, named over time as Humanistic Identification, Natural High Theory and Practice (NHTP), and finally NHTP Psychospirituality.

Living out his "Both...And" logic, Buzz integrated his therapeutic career with that of the hospital researcher. Five hundred scientific publications came from this vocational choice. A dozen performance awards were given to his hospital programs. The one he valued the most was the Veterans Administration annual award for "the highest example of therapeutic rehabilitation services to veterans." This award for his movement-oriented psychotherapy with drug addiction and post-traumatic stress patients reflected Walter's insatiable curiosity about how community interactions stimulate changes in inner and outer movements; and how the perceived actions of others contribute to any person's decisions. Dr. Raymond Corsini, internationally acknowledged historian of therapies, wrote, both in 1981 and 2001, "Psychotherapy undoubtedly reveals the personality of the practitioner/theoretician. . . . A unique personality of our times, Buzz O'Connell has something very important to say. . . . Read (him) very slowly and carefully."

From his broad and intense interest in lived life, Buzz was called "a Renaissance man." He loved to teach in a democratic-interactive manner, and did so as a college lecturer in the evenings. On the adjunctive staff at Baylor University (Waco), the University of Texas, the University of Houston, and the C. G. Jung Center, it was his work at the University of St. Thomas (Houston) that was closest to his heart. In the mid-sixties, Buzz became the psychology department, teaching all subjects for a short time. At that University, Buzz, with some of his students, often priests, set up the innovative Institute for Creative Community Living where housewives could earn graduate credit for teaching skills in the process of encouragement to families. On the more structured level at the Baylor College of Medicine, he taught group psychotherapy and often played difficult patients with groups of medical students as a form of real-life practice.

For Dr. O'Connell, psychology was for community use. Over the years, his "community" extended to an expanding Universe and a hidden, loving non-pampering God who never stops communicating. To this end, his theoretical creativity forged the sickness-health continuum in a productively innovative way. Interactional relationships of physical, psychological, spiritual, social and interpersonal factors create the personal life style, both unique and similar to the styles of others. Like any dynamic system of relationships, change in one element leads to perturbations of others. And so Buzz was called "the breach boy," taking his commitment to the process of encouragement into dysfunctional states anywhere. With his black colleagues, he was asked to create, lead and research the first police-community interventions in the late 60s. Over an eighteen-month period, the entire police force met with community militants to stop the rioting of that time. Dr. O'Connell conducted "Adlerian" group sessions using psychodrama on prime time ABC-TV. All of his techniques and concepts were always in the service of transforming adversarial goals into cooperative community ones. Buzz's sociodramas based on the solution of community problems were shown on Houston TV, as family educational entertainment, long before Oprah and Dr. Phil.

These early career years were called by Buzz his "Camelot days." Institutions appeared to be ready to make the quantum leap into the practice of encouragement with democratic behavior. He practiced his first encouragement workshops with religious orders, which had heard of his didactic-experiential labs where participants were exposed to short lectures followed by group practice on the issue of the lecture. He became a consultant to

all the school districts around Houston on creating encouraging groups and communities. The Diocese of Galveston-Houston made churches available as parish educational centers for teaching encouragement to dysfunctional families. Buzz never wavered in his conviction that institutions have never learned the process of democratic encouragement. The "Camelot days" were a (necessary) false dawn.

Like the true American cowboy who rode the range from only 1866 to 1886, this initial wave of teaching cooperation-as-equals lasted only twenty years. Downsizing of awareness of psychological, spiritual (Self-esteem) and Soulful (compassionate) connections followed the hidden decision to criminalize and medicalize any perturbations of social quietment. Parents and teachers intensified the running after externals that never give happy, humor and joy for long. Lacking time commitment and skills in listening, parents chose ineffective pills for pseudo-diseases. Politicians prate, institutions punish and doctors prescribe. But teaching of discipline, which has never been a popular practice with institutions and the institutionalized mind, has all but disappeared.

Dr. O'Connell retired from Houston when V. A. patients were discharged according to the time stay of a Florida V. A. hospital with the most rapid turn over rate. Social Darwinism was born again when the profit motive dictated a deeply discouraged perception of treatment (drugs alone).

Active treatment for change was discontinued. Drug programs took on a punishment perspective and teaching of discipline once again became seen as a wasteful "softness" toward patients (and prisoners). For fifteen years Buzz was involved with fifteen companies in managed health care, a task that everyone saw as totally impossible. Finally, he concluded that the treatment of mental illness was being decided by the profit motive of the stock exchange. Managed health care was really mangled health care. Money went out of the system for exorbitant CEO competitions. Training and research on practitioner skills were non-existent.

While retired, Dr. O'Connell continued to serve community issues, mainly as a volunteer. He helped establish the Bastrop Community Center and conducted psychospiritual groups there for a decade. He taught psychospiritual prayer groups for churches, and did group work in schools, churches and prisons. After a successful experience with melanoma,

Buzz wrote a weekly column called "Close to Eternity" for THE BASTROP ADVERTISER for a few years.

Now for the punch line. If traditional professional helpers had seen an objective report on someone with Buzz's background and dysfunctionalities, they never ever would have predicted that person would ever live a non-institutionalized life, all because they never knew the relational dynamics of encouragement. Positive change through encouraging dialogue is still alien to institutionalized worldviews.

A wag who knew much of the stress and negativities in Buzz's existence said that he should have been the Patron Saint of Chronic Failures. Another said that psychological science would benefit by researching his every movement, inner and outer, to discover how one can play such a bad hand so well.

Buzz had a deeply discouraged and discouraging family. So he taught families to encourage. . . . Buzz lived with deeply discouraging institutions, so he taught love, courage, happiness, joy, and humor in and for institutions. . . . Buzz hated the power needs and boredoms of the standard classrooms and refused to go to school. So he changed classrooms into interactive circles with positive meaning. . . . Buzz was a skinny and depressed kid. So he taught self-disclosure, feedback and humor as a way of maintaining and enhancing Self-esteem and compassionate connections. . . . Churches and the religiosity-addicted taught Buzz to hate himself and others and feel guilty about anything. So Buzz taught the images, words, and sensations of loving prayer as growth of awareness for Spirit, Soul, and perhaps for even for the Universe. . . . Buzz was told as a ten year old that he was responsible for killing his father, who died playing with him. So Buzz made the letting go of death-fears a goal for therapy. . . . Buzz was punished for being depressed and phobic as a child. So Buzz trained himself to be an internationally known expert on treatment of depressions and phobias.

Everything in conventional wisdom and treatment was emphatic in its negative certainty about Buzz. And so Buzz opened the door to the study of eternal wisdom. And so Buzz changed therapy's goals from talking of the past exclusively and "letting out" negativities forever. Buzz learned from personal experience, as well as from treatment and research, that those who go through life letting it out are building it within far faster.

In the class prophecy of his high school, Buzz was predicted “to go nowhere, do nothing, be nothing . . . with no reaction.” He wanted two goals: “To be a war hero,” as he saw his father, and to “take care of the family.” But he failed miserably at both identity needs. He hoped to escape his misery-making by taking a train to Texas. In fifteen years, he was seen professionally as an international expert of the process of personal identity. Enrolling almost penniless in graduate school, he tried to escape starvation by becoming a ward attendant at the Austin State Hospital. He was the first Yankee and the first college student to do so. Many potential Jack Nicholson and Tom Hanks movies are inherent in the conflict resolutions of that desperate dilemma. In relationships with desperate, insane criminals and deeply discouraged criminally insane, the seeds of his psychospirituality took root forever.

The three-year experience, which he could not readily escape, changed his life completely. In that fiery metanoia, Buzz never for a day forgot the brutality and murders of that home-grown Texan Buchenwald. He vowed he would never let those satanic atrocities, or even benign indifference, happen to anyone involved with him, so help him God. And he never did, to the best of his ability, for the rest of his life . . .

Dr. O’Connell was a diplomate in clinical psychology and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, the Academy of Clinical Psychology, the American Association of Applied and Preventive Psychology, and the International Academy of Eclectic Psychotherapists. He was a life member of the American Society of Adlerian Psychology, of which he was a past president. He was also a life member of the American Academy of Psychotherapists. Early in his career, Dr. O’Connell was named by the American Psychological Association as one of the top ten psychodramatists and one of the hundred most famous and currently productive clinical psychologists, on the three occasions when that research on psychologists was conducted. Living out the “both...and” logic of growth, he was listed in both the Marquis Who’s Who in Science and Engineering and Science and the International Who’s Who in Medicine.

One of Walter O’Connell’s later desires was to type his obituary in a manner free from ego pre-tensions of being better-than and different-from others. Instead he wanted to communicate what no one had ever told him. And that was, what did they really want

from life, and what did they do when they didn't get it? Wherever he is now, Buzz knows he has failed again. But since when did failure ever stop his bully-battling?

Shakespeare's King Lear gave the "remnant of a shipwreck" great solace. To wit:

So we'll live . . . And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at
gilded butterflies . . . and take upon us the mystery of things,

As if we were God's spies.

And we'll wear out . . . In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great one,

That ebb and flow by th' moon . . .

NUNC DIMITTIS

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