

HOMAGE TO A SORCERER

By Michael Ventura

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A sorcerer died two or three months ago. Liver cancer, they said, but the details are vague. Also vague is why it took so long for word to get out. There are strange rumors. No matter. All this is as it should be for a sorcerer. Strangest of all, in a way, were the obituaries of the media heavies, a blurry photo in *The New York Times*, tributes that were respectful in a distant and baffled sort of way. It's doubtful *The New York Times* ever before felt compelled to pay homage to a sorcerer. But that was Carlos Castaneda's mojo. Many who professed not to take him seriously nevertheless read him, remembered, and were haunted. Let them wonder whether he was born in 1931, as he said, or in 1925, as some immigration records said. Let them wonder whether he was Peruvian or Mexican. Wonder, even in such minor matters, will be good for them.

Carlos Castaneda has died. There aren't many to bear witness to or for him, because he didn't allow many witnesses. One met him by invitation, usually, and even that was more fluke than not. Those invited were of all sorts. I happened to be one, for reasons that weren't clear (to me) and probably aren't important. Perhaps I was called to be a witness?

About 12 years ago a friend who worked in a bookstore in Santa Monica called: Carlos Castaneda was giving a talk in the cellar of the store (it would be in the cellar!), by invitation only, would I like to come? Who knew it was really him, I said? My caller, whom I had reason to trust, said, "It's Carlos, alright."

He was a small man. Impossible to tell his age. Didn't look much over 40, but his eyes were older, smiling eyes but deepened by a vague sense of grief. He laughed readily, didn't insist that we take him seriously, stood before us in an attitude of welcome. He wanted us to ask him questions. He said there was something he'd forgotten, and that sometimes he came out of his seclusion and talked to strangers hoping that a question would spark the memory of this forgotten thing. He didn't say this sadly. He was frank and matter-of-fact. That night nobody asked the question he was seeking, but every question brought forth a story of Don Juan, and every story had laughter in it. As in his books, when Castaneda spoke of Don Juan the old Yaqui wizard was near and dangerous, inviting us to adventure. It was Castaneda's laughter, more than his skills as a storyteller, that convinced me of his sincerity and authenticity. He talked for free, had nothing to gain from us, spoke without artifice. People rarely laugh when they lie. At least, in my experience, they don't laugh sweetly. And there was an irresistible sweetness to this man.

He described the most fantastic experiences as though they were *almost* jokes, but the joke was on him. I had the impression of a desperate man, but a man who knew how to live with desperation in ways that made it something else. He'd transformed his desperation, as a sorcerer must, into a search. (Was I seeing in him the man I would like to be, who, though fated to desperation, could be desperate in a wise and engaging and gentle way? Perhaps.) He was, at the same time, vulnerable and invulnerable: vulnerable in that he seemed a little lost; invulnerable in that he was on his path, a path of heart. If he was lost it was because that path had led him to unknown and unexpected territory. It would have been easier for him to face physical danger than to face that there was

something important about Don Juan he'd forgotten. But he was facing it, and in public. More than magic tricks and the Sorcerer's Way, Don Juan had taught him to be brave.

When he finished speaking, and the 20 or so people in that cellar milled around, he greeted a couple of old friends. I didn't want to intrude, didn't introduce myself, wouldn't have known what to say anyway. So, in effect, I met him but he didn't meet me.

Then, about three years ago, another friend called. Would I like to go to lunch with Carlos Castaneda? Why I received this invitation I was never told. It turned out that there were four of us and Carlos. We met at the Pacific Dining Car, one of the best (and most expensive) steakhouses on the West Coast. (Carlos picked up the check.) He had changed, and so had I. We had both lived a lot further into our very different desperations, and carried them with more assurance. He was much thinner, older ó obviously ill. Whereas in the bookstore's cellar he had dressed casually, this day he was decked out in an elegant suit. But for all his fragility he seemed much livelier, happier, and even funnier. The food was very fine, but really we lunched on laughter. Even his saddest stories of Don Juan were, again, like jokes; but this time the joke wasn't on Carlos, wasn't on us ó the joke was between the wizard and God, and a splendid joke it was.

I won't repeat those stories. I wasn't there to record them. They were his to tell or not. Best that anything he chose not to write should die with him.

But two moments caused not laughter but silence. A woman at the table said she loved her job, her husband, and her child, but still she felt a lack ó it was that she had no spiritual life. How could she achieve a spiritual life?

Answering this woman, Carlos didn't change the lightness or generosity of his manner; yet a steely thing came into his voice, a tone that made his words pierce all of us. He said that when she got home at night she should sit in her chair and remember that her child, her husband, everyone she loved, and she herself, were going to die ó and they would die in no particular order, unpredictably. "Remember this every night, and you'll soon have a spiritual life."

Notice that he didn't tell her what sort of spiritual life to have, much less whether it should agree with his. He didn't suggest she read his books more carefully, or attend the movement classes he'd begun to teach. He gave her a practical instruction, something she could accomplish within the parameters of her life as it was, and then assured her that this would set her on her own spiritual path, whatever that might turn out to be. This is the mark of a true Teacher.

Later in the conversation this woman asked how she could discipline herself to follow his advice, deeply follow it, so that it wouldn't be just an exercise. Carlos said: "You give yourself a *command*."

On the page there's no duplicating how he said it. He spoke quietly, but it was as though he'd suddenly jammed a knife into the tabletop.

"What's that mean?" one of us asked.

"It means you give yourself a *command*." And that was that.

A command is not a promise. A command is not "trying." A command is something that must be obeyed. His tone invoked something deeper than the idea of mere will. His was a call to action. He wasn't talking about mulling or meditating or analyzing or wishing. To step on the path you *step on the path*. There is no substitute for that.

After a nine-months-pregnant pause, the conversation took flight again. He told of a party at which a very tall and handsome Native American was saying, with great

solemnity, that *he* was Carlos Castaneda, and revealing all sorts of Don Juan's "secrets." Did Carlos disabuse him of that fantasy?

"No!" he laughed. "He looked the way people expect Carlos Castaneda to look! Not some little round-faced brown man. And he was having such a good time! Why ruin it? Let *him* be Carlos for an evening!"

About a year later the woman who'd asked those questions at our lunch sent me a pamphlet that Carlos had printed privately. He'd requested she send it on to me. One passage goes:

"Sorcerers understand discipline as the capacity to face with serenity odds that are not included in our expectations. For them, discipline is a volitional act that enables them to intake anything that comes their way without regrets or expectations. For sorcerers, discipline is an art: the art of facing infinity without flinching, not because they are filled with toughness, but because they are filled with awe. ... Discipline is the art of feeling awe."

Any manifestation of the universe, any way in which it behaves toward us, isn't merely about *us*, isn't merely psychological, but is a movement of the universe, and as such what happens to us, no matter what it is, connects us to everything, and in that connection what can be felt but awe? "A live world," he wrote, "is in constant flux. It moves; it changes; it reverses itself." We try to defend ourselves against that, but we cannot. The only freeing response is awe.

When I saw him years ago in that cellar, an unhappier man than the dying man at lunch, I wrote: His presence was an admission that every truth is fragile, that every knowledge must be learned over and over again, every night, that we grow not in a straight line but in ascending and descending and tilting circles, and that what gives us power one year robs us of power the next, for nothing is settled, ever, for anyone.

Now I would add: What makes this bearable is awe.

Go well, Don Carlos.

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