

IN MEMORIAM

KARL C. SANDBERG

By Douglas Parker

KARL SANDBERG grew up in the Mormon village of Monroe, Utah, and throughout his life, he harvested lessons from those formative years. He drew upon the idealism of its United Order period and the hard realism of its present. For Karl, that small town was a microcosm of the full human condition, etched in the ordinary lives of ranchers, farmers, midwives, and young lovers. There he found the meaning of birth, life, and death, of marriage and divorce, of bankruptcy, suicide, and failure, of strength, courage, perseverance, and character. His collected sermons could be titled, "All I ever needed to know, I learned in Monroe."

Karl Sandberg engaged people, God, and life with honesty, thoughtfulness, art, and humor. *Sunstone* readers have known Karl since 1978, when one of his poems was the cover feature. He taught French and humanities for 24 years at Macalaster College, showing students the joy of living the examined life. Karl and I first met in the 1950s in Boulder, Colorado, when I was a professor at University of Colorado school of law and Karl was a visiting professor for the summer in the economic institute. Ever since, we have had a friendship that was an ongoing, expansive conversation. He changed the lives of many, and with his death last year, countless men, women, and children now miss his easy personality that somehow brought out one's best.

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Dawn and Karl Sandberg kicking back at a Sunstone symposium.

When Karl and Dawn traveled, they often stayed with friends. They were relaxed house guests. Karl often wandered around the kitchen in his pajamas. Once, when Karl stayed with us in Boulder, we placed him in a downstairs bedroom next to the bedrooms of our young children. We told them to be quiet in the morning so Karl could sleep in. In the morning, things were too quiet. When we investigated, we found all of them in bed with Karl, listening in rapt attention to him

tell how he and his family almost trapped Santa Claus.

Why did so many people feel so strongly about him? Karl charmed people with his wit, gentleness, humor, and intellect, and he engaged their souls with his insights and expansive views. But of greater significance, Karl was a listener who validated his friends with his intent interest in their ideas, struggles, thoughts, and feelings. In conversation, his thoughts were not centered on himself or his own views.

When friends engage our souls and provide a mirror with which to see ourselves, they serve as a catalyst for self-discovery. What our friends say to us is important in a friendship. What we say to our friends is even more important. Good friendships elicit good conversations, and we are sometimes surprised by what we say. Through such friendships, we discover and explore our tendency and capacity for cynicism or optimism, for faith and doubt, for hurt, anger, prejudice, and love. Friend Karl was just such a catalyst for self-discovery. In helping us discover ourselves, he also helped us discover the love that can exist and last between friends.

Karl was a hands-on, physical man who often embraced

friends at greeting and departure, but he was not an emotional man, and not one given to tears. Recently, however, while he and I were driving to a small mountain town for lunch, he shed tears and had difficulty controlling his voice while talking about his pride in and love for his children. One by one, Karl discussed his children's gifts and competencies, he extolled their individuality, and he delighted that each was unique.

Their children grew up in a loving home, graced with conversation, tenderness, and humor. But love can sometimes be over-protective and stifle individual growth. Karl and Dawn gave them freedom. They mandated no strict conformity against which to rebel. They gave them freedom to discover and become what they are, encouragement to think and act for themselves. Just as listening is essential to friendship, a freedom supported by love and confidence is essential to the rearing of children.

ONE distinguishing quality of Karl's, and perhaps the one in which he was most gifted, was his love of language, poetry, and words. Almost everything he said and wrote was carefully crafted. In 1971, he sent to Corene and me copies of a few of his poems, with these introductory words:

Dear Doug and Corene,

Though I was born modest, it wore off, and your invitation to exchange letters on subjects which involve our deepest probings and ponderings has led me to believe that I might share with you a few poems which I have written over the past few years, knowing that the intuitions of friends will make up for the deficiencies in idiom.

Consider the comprehension and grasp in this poem:

SABBATH

No, nothing will do just now
but to sit beneath a mesquite tree
in a dry creek bed and look long at cactus.
The saguaro does not sway or bend or mark the breeze.
It has no use. It simply is.
I can look at it until time is lost
and it will not move.

No, I will not leave just now.
Here the bow is not cracked.
Here nothing is drawn taut.
I must get away from every place
where people have sold soap and automobiles
and have drawn themselves taut.

No one has seen a cactus move.
Even its birth did not part the womb of stillness.
I will intrude upon its world of being.
I will sit on earth prepared by long dying
and wonder what people mean when they say,
"What time is it?"

The air about the saguaro is unmarred
by talk of "duty," or "responsibility," or "obligation."
The saguaro is God's servant.
It keeps the ancient law of the Sabbath:
"On this day thou shalt do no work,
neither anything respectable,
all day long."

Karl had the capacity to stop, slow down, do nothing except observe, as illustrated by this very short poem:

Weary of humans,
I sat on a park bench throwing crumbs to the pigeons.
And behold! A sparrow appeared in their midst.
And it came to pass that the pigeons smote him sorely and cast
him out,
But he darted back and seized the largest crust in his beak,
And rose up as on eagles' wings,
For the race is not to the swift
Neither the battle to the strong.
But lo! His fellow sparrows did fall upon him to despoil him,
Upon which seeing I decided I might as well
Go back to the office.

KARL often pondered death and the existence of a life after death. We talked about this on several occasions during his last two months. Karl knew that his body was completely worn out, but he was not ready to die. He had unfinished business of the mind and pen. His mind was filled with poetry and essays he felt an urgency to write. About a month before he died, when his capacity to type failed, he acquired a voice-activated computer which he never had a chance to use. He clearly saw, however, that death is a necessary adjunct of mortal life. For all of us, the process of dying starts the day we are born, and we merely await the timing. Death's approaching shadow invigorates and nourishes the richness of life and stimulates its productivity and fecundity.

Karl was sure life continues after death. It went beyond hope. I was somewhat taken aback by his surety. Karl was sure that thinking, feeling, loving, knowing, freedom, and individuality continue after death. This was not a matter of cocksure knowledge held in place of hope and belief. It was just that his mind was completely and totally accepting about the matter, and he was totally at peace.

Karl, the expert on Pierre Bayle and the historical struggle between faith and reason, was totally at peace. Distinctions between believing and knowing were irrelevant. Karl, in dying, had no fear that he was saying goodbye to himself. Several spiritual experiences had provided some of the grounding for his peace of mind. During his last month, his mind and heart were close to a reunion with his father and mother to whom he had much to say. Watching Karl anticipate and contemplate his approaching death makes me less fearful of dying.

On the question whether there is a loving God, Karl's answer was always YES, but he made no pretensions about capturing God in finite theological detail, or of knowing God's

Karl Sandberg in Sunstone

(references to *Sunstone* magazine or symposium tape number)

POETRY IN SUNSTONE

- "Requiem for a Town" (Mar.-Apr. 1978)
- "The Last Speaker Will Give the Interpretation of Tongues" (Jan. 1987)
- "Autumn" (Sept. 1987)
- "In the Park of the Awakening, Washington D.C." (June 1996)
- "Sic Transit" (Mar.-Apr. 1998)

WRITINGS IN SUNSTONE

- "Pascal's Wager on the Mormon Roulette Wheel" (Jan. 1987)
- "Modes of Belief: David Whitmer, B. H. Roberts, Werner Heisenberg" (Sept. 1988)
- "Mormonism and the Puritan Connection: The Trials of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson and Several Persistent Questions Bearing on Church Courts" (June 1994)
- "To Find One's Voice" (June 1994)
- "The Long Shadow of the United Order" (Dec. 1996)
- "In Quest of the Christian Classics: The Book of Jonah" (June-July 1998)
- "Whither Mormon Scholarship?" (Dec. 1998)
- "Worlds in Collision" (Apr. 2001)

SELECTED SYMPOSIUM PRESENTATIONS

- "Documents, Stones, and Symbols—The Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith as Translator," Washington, D.C., 1987 (#025, *Dialogue* 22:4/17)
- "Mormonism and Its Widening Contexts—or a Discussion of Christianity and the World Religions: Paths to Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism and . . . Would You Believe?" Salt Lake, 1989 (#090)
- "Mormonism on the Anxious Bench: The Puritan Connection and the Dynamics of Testimony," Chicago, 1992
- "The End is Not Near; You Must Learn to Cope: The Intellectual in Mormonism," Chicago, 1993 (#08)
- "The Word of God in the Twenty-First Century," Salt Lake, 1994 (#351)
- "Masonry and the Making of Mormonism: Exploring the Issues," Salt Lake, 1995 (#160)
- "Jacob and the Angel—Issues and Approaches to Reading the Old Testament," San Francisco, 1997 (#20)
- "In the Household of Faith and Reason: A Parable for Our Time," Salt Lake, 1998 (#125).
- "The Moral Critique of the Scriptures During the Enlightenment," Salt Lake, 1998 (#323)
- "The Revivalist and the Seer: Charles H. Finney and Joseph Smith Jr.," San Francisco, 1999
- "Literature, Truth, and the Religious Quest," Salt Lake, 1999 (#111)

mind, likes, and dislikes better than God knows them himself. Karl was not given to preaching or to being God's spokesman, press secretary, or campaign manager. He graciously permitted God to be bigger than his grasp of him. Karl, in a way, sought to protect God's privacy against those who know God's opinion and position on every issue.

Karl had somewhat of a wish that the first of the Ten Commandments had been worded, "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me, not even the highest and most correct idea you hold of me." So worded, it would warn against a subtle species of idolatry: that of supposing that we, as children, can comprehend and grasp, even with revelation, the full measure and divinity of God. We should not reduce God's stature to the level of our present mortal capacity to comprehend him. We should hold in great respect, reverence, and gratitude the inspired canonized accounts of God's nature, but answers to children must be couched in language suited to their limited capacity to understand. Full and grateful use should be made of the understanding of God graciously granted to us by revelation, but we should hold open the likelihood that God possesses a stature and glory greater than can be fully revealed to us at the present time, and greater than our highest and most correct idea of

denominational preference, but he declined to chose one. Other such individuals are Nelson Mandela and Ghandi. We regularly meet people who do not have the public prominence of these individuals, but they do have the same generic spirituality. They are found in every creed and culture. Such persons play out their lives on a smaller, less conspicuous stage. Karl saw this kind of spirituality in others, and it fueled his interest in comparative religions.

Nevertheless, he also had a passionate preoccupation and love for his Mormon faith and heritage. He was a keen interpreter of its traditions and growth. Karl loved the scriptures and made them a life-long study. Even as literature, they were on a level above Shakespeare. These topics he pursued in papers delivered at the Sunstone symposiums.

Karl was passionate about living in and for the present. At every moment of eternity, the present is here to be dealt with, enjoyed, made meaningful, and celebrated. The future will always be in the future; it is an abstraction. We are confronted eternally with the ongoing now. Do well by the present, and the future will take care of itself. If you wish to be happy, be happy now; don't put it off. A poem, written in 1971, speaks to this:

him.

Karl was a man of deep spirituality. It was not a testimony-bearing spirituality and was not self-proclaimed. It was manifest in the way people felt when they were around him, and in the way in which he imparted dignity and respect to persons whom he met. His was a non-denominational spirituality not necessarily limited to identification with a particular creed. It was one identified with the highest upward thrust that might be found in persons of all faiths and persuasions who radiate a reverence for life. By his interest and concern, he lifted people up. We know some prominent leaders of recent history who were possessed of spirituality that bore no trademark. Lincoln was one. Impressed by his great reliance upon God and prayer, people were always seeking to have Lincoln reveal his denom-

In a conversation I was always at the edge and agreed with everything that was said.
 After I had raised four children and had supported my husband in his calling
 And made it possible for him to be a stake mission president and then a high councilman
 And after I had washed the diapers and cooked the meals and cleaned the house so that he could be gone
 And after I lived through my children making their problems my problems until I had no more of my own, I died.
 I never talked in church, but if I did, I would take as my text, the scripture that says, "He that loseth his life shall lose it."

If Karl had written the Book of Mormon passage, "Adam fell that man might be, and men are that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25), he would have added, "now, in the present."

Another key to understanding Karl is found in his embrace of the joys of the body. If we are ashamed of the flesh, and of sensuality, and of the pleasures associated with the five senses—if the flesh exists only to be castigated—then why should the material body be resurrected? Let life continue only in the spirit. Therefore, to fully understand Karl, your gaze must always include oil and vinegar, avocados, French bread, and especially sautéed mushrooms and artichokes. He loved to cook and eat. Think of the meal preparation scene in the film *Babbette's Feast*, or the café scene in *Tom Jones* where the juice of a ripe pear ran down Tom's chin.

Just as Karl was a deeply spiritual man, he was a carnal man, the most carnal man I've known. The New Testament records that some who saw Jesus eating and drinking with publicans and sinners falsely accused him of being a wine bibber and a glutton. Jesus was an extrovert. In this respect, his lifestyle was almost completely opposite that of John the Baptist, and his disciples occasionally brought this up with him.

Through our eyes, ears, and nose, by taste and touch, we find God manifest in the grandeur of his handiwork. With the aid of the flesh, our spirits can proclaim, "How Great Thou Art!" One of Karl's poems puts this well:

A Hymn in Praise of Carnality
 (or Confessions of a Reformed Puritan)

I think the flesh must be holy,
 so alive it is.
 I will slake a deep thirst in a
 glacial stream
 Holding my mouth against
 the rocks until my face is numb,
 then looking up,
 Feel the sun a purging coal
 upon my lips.

I think the flesh must be holy,
 So much does carnality delight me.
 I plunge and swim in air
 that runs quick
 Between sun and ice.
 It is free.
 Smoke and pine boughs, these am I—
 Wondrous the fleshy nose
 That makes me one with air.

Holy is the carnal pleasure of the eye,
 So quickly am I inebriate.
 I will sit in the sun and breeze,
 I will do nothing at all,
 And the eye goes skipping upon the hills.
 The eye encompasses the granite cliffs,
 the fire born,
 The eye runs along their lines,
 One with the sky,
 And follows them beyond all thought.
 The delicate and yellow flowers
 growing where yesterday was ice,
 A thousand jolly lovers it embraces at a time.

Yes, hooray,
 Yes,
 Even three cheers,
 Yes for carnality.

FINALLY, I speak directly to Karl, who is surely listening: "Karl, I salute you in the name of pluralism!" During our friendship of forty years, when we met or spoke after some absence, we usually greeted one another with that affirmation. We would close our letters and phone calls with, "Metaphysical pluralism is alive and well." By those short expressions, we reconfirmed the conclusions of many deliberations: our mutual conviction, our common faith, our answer to the philosophical question of whether reality is one or many.

Our answer to this question stated our shared position on the nature of God. In other words, does reality consist of one undifferentiated, indivisible entity of which we are merely facets or expressions? Or does reality consist of many separate, individual, independently real entities? Karl and I strongly opted for the latter view. We held the conviction that we are all self-aware, free-moving, independently real entities. We are free to be different, according to our own fashioning, and to be accountable, under the loving, nurturing guidance of a real God. This serious conviction became our humorous form of greeting.

Karl Sandberg was a renaissance man with many attractive facets on the diamond of his soul. He was a man whose many serious convictions were often wrapped in humor. He was a friend whose easy conversation made you say and be your best. I love you, dear friend, as do so many others.



To comment on this essay, or to share your remembrances of Karl, visit our website: <www.sunstoneonline.com>.



CLARA'S BREATH

In the dead night, her silence
wakes as surely as screams.
From the next room, her mother cannot
hear the papery whisper of lungs
so small, the browned air
of cities already coloring
like a child's spilled paint.
The mother resurrects herself, naked
in the moonlight and walks to the left
so as not to creak the wood floor,
not to let the others know how
she spends her nights. A pause
before opening the door, the brief shock
of chill brass lit under touch,
a quick wish for more light,
the calico curtains turned dirty
by the outdoor float of halogen.

All motion has stopped, and time
points in toward the still figure
prone on the bed, blanket
reaching for her arm. The instant
found in dark, the instant edged in light;
here hope is held in the swift
twitch of a child's breath.
The mother bends, praying herself
into her hands, all power,
all wakefulness, to the rise and fall,
rise and fall of the eggshell chest,
the wet dark mystery within.

—BRANDY MCKENZIE

ODETTE IN BLUE

There was a time when a stranger's eyes
would cause Odette to run

her heart would beat with the increasing
pulse of a tap or cistern

with washers wearing—
no repairing a heart full of spears

no sense remaking Psycho—Hitch did it
best

Odette did it too:

lost someone
wrapped her mind in theatre = black
curtain of despair
let house lights fall to blue
as she practiced placing hands just so;
fingers of china
draped between breasts
as trembling rests
for a lily,

Odette in blue:
like a ghost whose skin cut by light
might bleed the milk of dandelions.

Odette in blue:
the shell of a delicate creature with echoes
full of preverbal sobbing.

Odette in blue:
we knew her by her hands.

—CLAYTON HANSEN