

Jim Klee (1916-1996)

by Mike Arons

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James B. Klee died at age 80 on September 28th, 1996 at the Tanner Memorial Hospital, Carrollton, Georgia. He left his wife, Lucille, two daughters, Margret and Kathren, a son-in-law, Jeffery, and twin granddaughters. He earned his B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, in Psychology, all at the University of Michigan; then taught at Wesleyan, Carnegie Tech, the Universities of Arizona and Nebraska, followed by approximately two decades each at Brandeis University and the University of West Georgia. In the 1950s, he co-developed the Brandeis psychology program with Abraham Maslow and in 1970 joined the faculty at, then named, West Georgia College where he was highly instrumental to the success of its Humanistic Psychology program.

As a Fulbright scholar in 1963-1964, Klee spent a year teaching at Allahabad University in India. In 1994, the Association for Humanistic Psychology honored him with a special award never before given "For a unique lifetime contribution to the teaching of humanistic psychology." On his retirement from West Georgia in 1987, his colleagues showed him unanimous respect by establishing a permanent Jim Klee Forum which subsequently has brought to West Georgia such notable figures as Huston Smith, Clark Moustakas, Jean Houston, Stanaslav Grof, David Miller, Robert Romanyshyn and, this year to honor his memory, Stanley Krippner.

Klee's published collection *Points of Departure: Aspects of the Tao* includes such papers as "The Absolute and the Relative," "Omniscience, Time and Suchness," and the "One and the Many." This scholarly work which joins some of his interest themes, only tells a bit about Klee's life contribution. It is of special significance that he was honored by the Association for Humanistic Psychology for his teaching. He was the teacher extraordinaire, the unforgettable, life transforming teacher. In the 1950s and 1960s, students were most often initially attracted to the Brandeis psychology program by the writings of Maslow and other humanistic psychologists. Typically, Maslow wisely passed them on to Jim Klee's classes. Jim Klee was in the oral tradition what Abe Maslow was in the written tradition. In Klee's classroom, the major themes (existential, phenomenological, humanistic, transpersonal,

mythological) took on full lived resonance and amplification - transformative power - and this, ironically, by a special kind of "deconstruction" of humanistic "ideals" by a kind of "return to the things themselves" as they emerge from their primal "contextual juices" to reveal the dimensionality of other "things"—a process which takes them all beyond "thing-ness." One could find in any of Klee's classes everything he had said in any and all other classes. Any class was recognizably Klee and each class opened the old things in brilliantly insightful new ways. In this sense, his half-century of teaching could be described as a "holographic saga." One of his former West Georgia students, Larry Schor, described thusly the magic of Klee's teaching: "He wove an invisible thread between the obvious and the hidden, experience and context, the material and spiritual, the profane and the sublime." One might add the serious and the humorous. Klee's "hits" of profundity in the form of the banal and humorous came to be identified as "Klee-chez" (Clichés). For example, of the psychology of his day (and the "modern project") of reducing everything to its smallest component, Jim predicted that "When that project was finished it would be like the flies celebrating their conquest of the fly-paper."

Jim Klee was a physical giant. He stood 6'7" tall. However, most students likely remember him sitting, wide girth, in his hand-made steel frame green leather chair, which was reverently moved by students in advance to wherever he taught in the building. In retrospect one can recognize - via his writings and classroom - what an intellectual and spiritual giant he was. The enigmas of "the one and the many"; "the absolute and the relative," "the temporal and the timeless" - these are Jim Klee's life themes. These were variously treated under the catalogue titles of courses he taught: *Will, Choice and Belief; Myths, Dreams and Symbols; Dying, Death and Suicide; Creativity; Values and Meaning*. And virtually all these courses were taught before psychology showed any interest in those subjects.

Yet Klee's greatness was not in the espousal of philosophically lofty themes, but in the incredibly insightful way he brought these existentially to life through the everyday. For instance, he'd cite traffic engineering to indicate a shift in cultural consciousness, from the "totalizing authoritative" ("Stop sign") to the "holistically discretionary" ("Yield sign"). He'd look at the multi-armed Hindu figures relative to the dualistic Judeo-Christian tradition. For the Rabbi (or Descartes) it was "on the one hand or the other hand." For Eastern philosophy, it was "on the one hand, and on the other hand, and on the other hand and . . .

" ("More like the daily life of mothers"). With respect to the duality of that Cartesian split, Klee refrained it as an indeterminate break, as the point of creative discontinuity between such fixed positions as idealism and materialism. Klee portrayed this discontinuity by such concrete examples as the necessity to "leave slack" when threading a motion picture projector, or by the requirement for a slack in a sail. Himself a sailor, the sail boat was one of Klee's favorite metaphors for the existentiality of life. In line with this image of slack, Jim Klee presented everything "in this or that sense." It was the contextual "in the sense of" - or the shifting (like the winds) meaning milieu - out of which the significance and import of "things or ideas" took special form. One had to go beyond the literalness of things to open their fuller potential meanings: "The map is not the territory." Likewise, he reminded his students that in reading "the essential is in the space between words," an existential-creative (Buddhist) point which would later be taken up by Betty Edwards in her *Drawing on the Right Side* as "negative space."

Jim Klee wrote and taught early (in the 1940s and 1950s) of ideas and concerns which would come later to express or shape our times. He spoke the language and walked the talk of "postmodernism" decades before it was being discussed even by the fringe elements of psychology. He introduced "cognitive psychology" to behaviorists by stressing that the rats he and Maier studied at Michigan "could think." His own thinking style was deconstructionist, yet phenomenologically constructivist; his teaching approach was ongoing-hermeneutical. He brought to light together, in the context of psychology, Eastern-Taoist and Western-existential thought. He contextualized positivistic psychology in *Myths and Symbols* and introduced his students to the ways of Native Americans and, in this, he was an early pioneer of environmentalism and an intellectual precursor of psycho-ecology. He was speaking all this and "feminist consciousness" in the 1950s and, at that period, taught one of the first courses in psychology on *Creativity*.

Klee's office looked like an amalgam of the British Museum Library and a Museum of Oriental Art. It would be hard to imagine a more esoteric collection of books, hangings and artifacts. There was so much bulk there that Klee once remarked, "A man in a lifetime has but two office moves in him." When not sitting snugly in the middle of a classroom, Jim sat snugly in the middle of his office, surrounded by piles of journals and student papers: there nearly always with a book in hand but with the door wide open to anybody - like his classrooms which were open to a parade of children, spouses and pets.

In his office encounters, he was always fully present and could sit for hours with individual students in dialogues which joined classroom themes to life experiences. One never quite knew when the conversation - like the class lecture - passed from course advisement to philosophy; philosophy to therapy, therapy to ecology; ecology to geography; geography to sexuality; sexuality to spirituality, spirituality to the lettering on a student's T-shirt. In one of these office sessions, one student complained to Klee about her calculating, manipulating husband. She couldn't understand how he got that way. Jim asked her how she had prepared for the first date with him and if during it she had farted and asked what of herself and her family she had shown, and not shown, to this prospect before the marriage. The complaining student ultimately got the point.

Jim Klee's classes were ever original, in the sense that everything would be seen in new ways but also - compatible with such newness - in the sense of the fuller meaning of the term "originality." He spoke from the "points of departure" in himself to the "points of departure" in his students - from origin to origin - to the best of other, to that which is coming newly, uniquely, into being. That is, he spoke from where one is, the now - to and of the new, fresh and unique. Likewise, the commonplace, the everyday rhythm - ta, ta, ta - the "ten thousand things" that make life a drag, these were the flints Klee grounded on to spark fresh insights. These insights - at first isolated and obscurely sensed - organically grew and blossomed into visions; the breadth and scope in which students could ponder for a lifetime and from within which reflections they found the materials to discover and create their greater life meanings.

The most primal of these insights was for the student to recognize him or herself, and others, as source while, simultaneously, as not very much. This was realization of a paradox of the one and the many; the relative and absolute - the ocean in a drop, a drop in the ocean. Klee was dismissed from one of his first teaching positions for admonishing his students to "Stop coming into class to plug in their umbilical cords." For half a century, Jim Klee cut cords and set students existentially assail on the open seas. In one sense, Jim Klee is ever-present on each's unique and special voyage.

"Perhaps the most valuable thing about death is that we do not know much if anything about it. It forces man as nothing else to face his finite nature, to remind him of the soil whence he originally came and to which he returns. . . . From eternity we will ever come, and into eternity we will ever return."

- Jim Klee, Points of *Departure*, p. 212/218