

This correspondence will tell you something about my friend, Carl, and his death.

July 20, 1984 London

Dear Allan, ...I had 4 hours to kill before the train to Edinburgh so I went to Hampstead Heath which is not supposed to be cruisy during the day, but I soon met a totally sweet man -- we had sex in the bushes, which was quite relaxed and fun, and then set about getting acquainted verbally as we headed back to town on the subway. He makes his living raising vegetables organically, and writes free lance -- a pacifist, an internationalist, a humanist -- from Wales. Cheery, not intellectual, a very strong accent... his father is a miner, both parents are alcoholic and abused the kids a lot, devout Catholics -- and how does he appear on the scene, just 180° from upbringing in every way possible? I'm moved when he explains the bruises on his arm and his knee all bandaged up -- he's on his way back to Wales from Paris, where 2 Moroccans beat him up badly and took his money, boots and jacket. Somehow they missed his soul, though: not an ounce of resentment, somehow it all reinforced his belief in people. In fact, one of them ran after him, apparently drunk and remorseful, and the little Welshman helped the bruiser home, crying (the bruiser, that is). But the other one had his money. So I realized he was hitching home, broke and bandaged -- our encounter had renewed his goodwill, but he was a little shaky. He reluctantly borrowed train fare and I have no doubts that he'll send it back. He saw me off at the train and reiterated an open door at his cottage and garden any time you or I would like to visit. -- I realize on this trip how profoundly glad I am to be gay, and that it's possible to reach out and touch brothers, and what one finds is so fresh and good... XXX Carl

Carl travelled in Europe that summer, researching a book on country dance and making remarkable new friends. It seems important to me that we -- gay men, friends and healers -- reaffirm the wonder of encounters such as Carl's with the gardener from Wales. Even in these hard times sex is still a powerful catalyst. Its magic can still conjure up what's "fresh and good".

This rainbow winged horse was dispatched by Susanna Troxler, aged six, to graze and prance in Carl's hospital room.



January 3, 1986

Dear Carl, I got home late last night, after being away at the coast for several days. I saw your letter, and I knew I didn't want to open it... I fixed myself a thick black cup of coffee so I could stay awake and think about you. Doug held me and cried all over the top of my head. I'm pissed off to see that life seems to be a succession of random acts of violence, a basket of hand grenades going off in the Vienna airport or under your own bed.

Well I got my hand under my chin, and I'm looking out the window, thinking I should say cheery, nursely things, but my little bag of sunshine has a hole in the bottom. I imagine you going through your treatment, not having the stamina to read this ragged letter... It's like Aunt Wilma sending you a Hallmark card with a picture of a football player with a thermometer in his mouth.. My mother calls the chemotherapy "creamo-therapy", as in "I had my creamo-therapy today and I feel like a million dollars." Does that mean wrinkled and devalued? I hope you're doing OK with all that.

I understand how you feel about the doctors. When my sister's boyfriend was sick and had trouble swallowing, his doctor blithely recommended that he eat babyfood. I wanted to run out and buy a jar of pureed liver and pork sausage and fling it in his face with a plastic spoon. Remember that it's very stressful to play Dr. God, Know It All, Mr. Rational all the time and most doctors do what they can to protect themselves so that they can step in- to the arena every day. Don't expect too much from them. It's your friends who love you and your own inner light that will get you through.

...The other day at work, an old man told me that I had no idea how terrible it was to be old, battling constant aches and pains. I said, look, being young is no picnic either, I have troubles of my own. Bless his heart, he laughed.

It's good that you plan to finish your book. I'm still writing, and I have plans to do a piece called "Jersey City". Somebody's got to do it. I want to do some first hand research, and visit my mother if I can stand it... I'd like to visit you, if you felt up to it... I don't want to be part of a noisy throng leaving you feeling like an empty refrigerator with dirty dishes in the sink. So let me know. In any case, I'll write, I'll pray, I'll break a few windows... There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you. Elayne

Elayne is a nurse friend in Oregon. Among the many things she and Carl shared were New Jersey roots and a sense of the innate humor of things, which were one and the same to them, I suspect.

Dance On!

A round for Carl, by Dorothy Attneave

Handwritten musical score for 'Dance On!' in 3/4 time, featuring four staves of music with lyrics. The score is marked with circled numbers 1 through 4, indicating different parts of the song. The lyrics are: 'Like the mist on the green-wood-ed mount-ains, will your spir-it rise up and be gone? Will your love that like rains fell so free-ly, a-mong us bring life, and leave hearts that dance on? Like the ...'

One night shortly before Carl died, Dorothy called from Oregon. The song she had written for Carl was ready enough. He sat up in bed with the phone to his ear and beamed as three friends three-thousand miles away sang of the fog in the Douglas firs, of love and death and dancing. Over and over and over.

January 22, 1986

Dear Carl, Although it is winter, as I walked around your backyard on Tuesday... there were yellow crocuses just poking through the grass and, being a Yankee, that never ceases to amaze me in January. Something happened for me that I want to share with you. The day seemed to stand still as I stood and watched a bright blue sky, saw Allan talking on the phone, saw the laundry we'd just hung up together blowing gently, saw those wonderful pinwheels across the street spinning in the wind and time just seemed to stop. I'd had that feeling before, just once, when I was in labor, walking around our backyard. That day stood still also as I was privileged to be party to something about to change the world I knew. ...One person coming and one person going in my life... Thank you Carl for your strength and passion, for your wisdom and patience, for your friendship and love. Thank you. Carol

Like many friends, Carol came to help with laundry, meals, the phone and the book Carl was writing

January 27, 1986

Dear Allan, My best wishes to you all & thanks to the supporter who comforted me when I called Thursday evening. I've enclosed a copy of Carl's memory of Stevens McClave from RFD #1. "Whether there is a soul or not, I don't know. But the impact of his life, and his death, is surely here among us."

...When my father died in 1970, I was overwhelmed with thoughts of how we had lived all those years and never said anything about how much we actually cared for each other; he had a picture of me in his wallet when he died -- dropped dead when he was leaving work at Fisher Body. Gay liberation has made us I hope better about telling such important things to each other.
My love to you, Charley

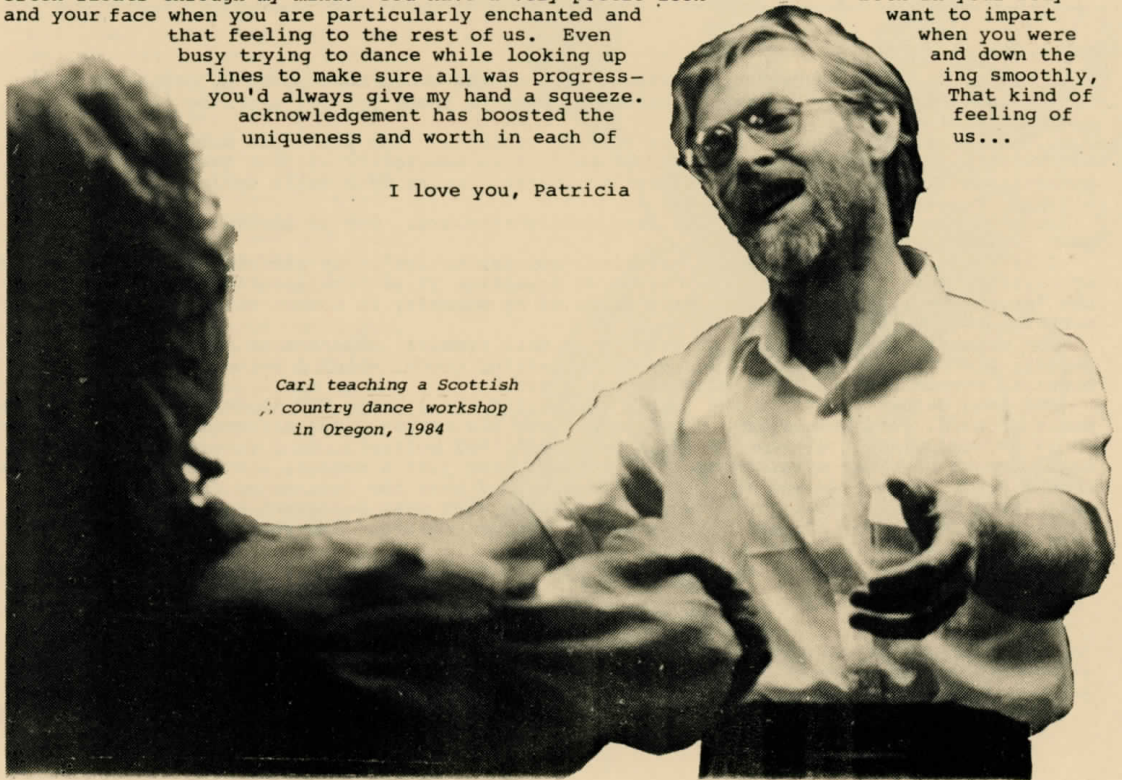
Charley, a poet and historian, along with several other smart and irreverent friends, provided Carl a sanctuary in Boston whenever life in N.C. got too muddy. Stevens was once Carl's lover. Years later, when he killed himself, Carl recollected him in an article for a magazine we published.

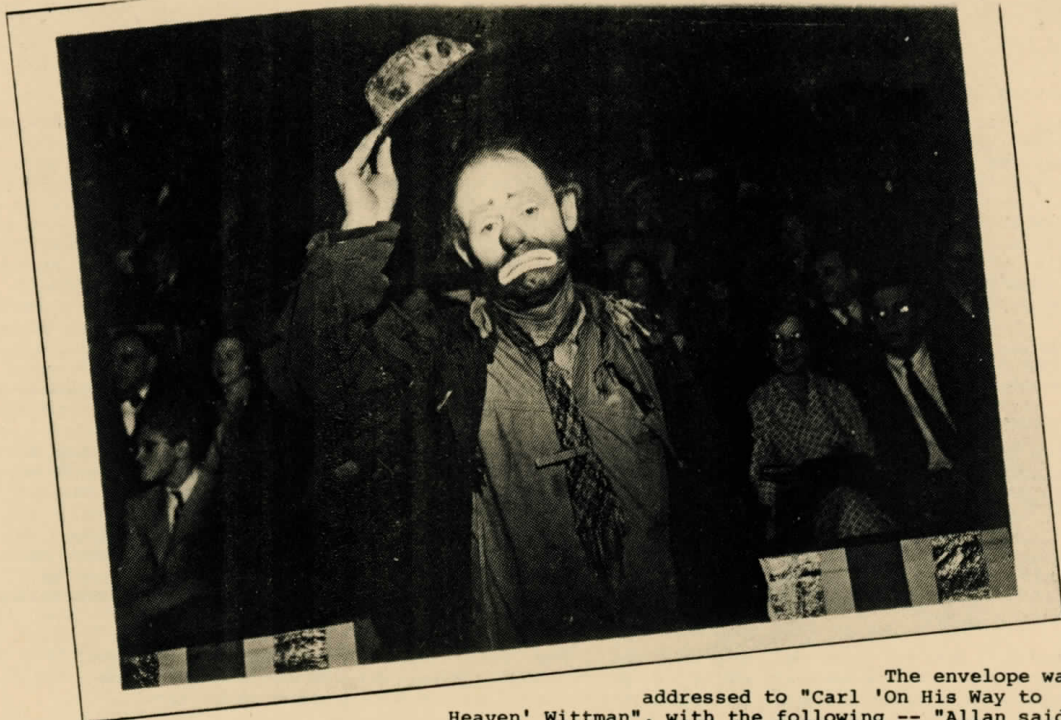
January 18, 1986

Dear Carl, ...When I'm enthralled by a dance and the music, a certain expression of yours often floats through my mind. You have a very poetic look both in your body and your face when you are particularly enchanted and want to impart that feeling to the rest of us. Even when you were busy trying to dance while looking up and down the lines to make sure all was progressing smoothly, you'd always give my hand a squeeze. That kind of acknowledgement has boosted the feeling of uniqueness and worth in each of us...

I love you, Patricia

*Carl teaching a Scottish
country dance workshop
in Oregon, 1984*





The envelope was addressed to "Carl 'On His Way to Heaven' Wittman", with the following -- "Allan said he'd bring this up so we don't have to throw a rock through the window." It was the night Carl ended his life. The note on the card read: "Carl -- You are dying translucent. Thanks and bon voyage with my love, Mab"

September 15, 1986

Dear Allan, ...You and Carl are a strong part of the whole that moved my career in this direction. And if I never said it before, I want to thank you for allowing me into your and Carl's life.

...There are many issues for nurses of AIDS patients. The principle one, that of self-determination, has long been settled for me. It is completely evident that only the patient has the right to decide his or her course, making both daily decisions and the ultimate decision...

For me, the issues remaining are less straightforward. One in particular troubles me each day I walk on the ward.

I believe, for all the new and technical sophistication of my profession, the real value of nursing is in person-to-person care. We formalize it as "therapeutic use of self" or the "psycho-social aspect". I simply think of my humanity in common with my patient as my most valuable nursing skill.

The disease that took Carl has threatened this premise. There's no denying AIDS is a deadly, contagious disease... How does the healing touch, which I value above all antibiotics, communicate itself through rubber gloves?

Not long before I met you and Carl I was caring for a young UNC student with a new diagnosis of AIDS. I'd become very close to him and his mother. One afternoon I was starting an IV on him, without gloves (in defiance of hospital policy). As I entered the vein, a small amount of blood splashed back on my hand. For just a moment, I experienced terrible, mortal fear. When I looked at Philip I knew he had seen the fear on my face. He pulled away, into himself. How, then, can I communicate that most important message: You are okay in spite of your illness. I see you, not your disease. Few people bring to this experience the strong self-concept Carl had.

...this is something I'll struggle with every day. Struggle to find the way, the balance.

With many feelings, Ann

Ann was working on the 6th floor at N.C. Memorial Hospital when we met her. She was a compassionate ally as Carl pursued his decision to quit drug-treatment and to go home. She now works in the AIDS research program at the National Institutes of Health in Maryland.