



John Mack



On September 27, 2004 John Mack was struck and killed by a car in London, a vehicle operated by a man under the influence of alcohol. He would have turned 75 years-old the following week, an event which friends, colleagues, and students were eagerly anticipating to celebrate. His tragic and unanticipated death, at a time when he was still vitally active and pursuing his many interests, abruptly ended a unique and most distinguished life and career.

The breadth of his interests and the quality of excellence that infused his interests were what made his life and career so remarkable. In a single decade between 1967 and 1977 he completed his psychoanalytic training with honors and distinction, initiated and established an academic department of psychiatry at The Cambridge Hospital, and completed his Pulitzer Prize winning psychobiography of Lawrence of Arabia, *A Prince of Our Disorder*. Any one of those accomplishments might be considered a lifetime achievement by most.

John was born in New York City in 1929. After his undergraduate education at Oberlin College he came to Boston for medical school, psychiatric

residency, and psychoanalytic training. Graduating cum laude from Harvard Medical School, he did a medical internship at Massachusetts General Hospital. After completing his psychiatry training at Massachusetts Mental Health Center (MMHC) where he was the first Chief Resident of the Day Hospital, he completed a two-year tour of duty in the U.S. Air Force serving as a Captain in Japan. Upon returning from the military in 1961, he completed a child fellowship at MMHC and, shortly thereafter, graduated from the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute (BPSI).

There was restlessness in John that was creatively channeled. He considered his life an odyssey – a search for inner harmony and meaning that took him beyond himself to an expanding scope of commitment to social issues, scholarship, and the pursuit of clinical excellence. In all of these areas he was a consummate

teacher and mentor for those who accompanied him on any part of his journey.

His boundless energy and curiosity took him in many interesting, challenging, and sometimes controversial directions, such as his interest in exploring the experiences of individuals who reported to have contact with alien beings. Throughout the diversities, directions and controversies, the mainstays of his life and career were his unrelenting devotion to clinical care, teaching, and social activism. Those who had the special privilege to witness him interview patients were awed by his gentleness and his capacity to elicit the salient aspects of a person's life experiences. By his ability to tune into the strengths of individuals, their disappointments and pain, he was able to connect and convey to people a sense of being understood, comforted and respected. A colleague commented, "He made the person feel like he was paying as much attention to them as any human could pay another human being." And his gift for clinical attunement went beyond the patient. John's case conferences were not only beneficial for the patient, but were also incisive and enriching for the faculty, trainees, and staff. He encouraged caregivers to regard patients as people and to appreciate their inner life and the important external realities that affected them. This was also evident in his therapy encounters with children. A new member of the staff at The Cambridge Hospital was first introduced to him in the context of witnessing a play therapy session with a child. John was with a little boy who was crawling around the floor pushing a toy truck, making motoring noises. John was gently speaking with the child as he tried to engage him further in conversation. When the staff person was introduced, he looked up briefly and said, "Welcome to the department," and then continued on with the child. Recalling the incident some 30 years later, she remembered the warmth in his voice, his tender caring for the young child, and his penetrating blue eyes. She quipped, "Who ever imagined the Chairman of an HMS Department with this kind of image?" He was creative, imaginative, sensitive and willing to go beyond conventional means to understand his patients' realities and to impart this understanding to his trainees.

The extraordinary capacity for scholarship was evident in John's tenacious curiosity and his keen and searching intellect. His interests ranged widely, from the investigation of dreams and nightmares and development of self-esteem in childhood to the study of suicide, psychobiography, international conflict, and self-governance problems in alcoholics and in society at large. John's exploration of nightmares dated back to his psychoanalytic trainee when in 1964 he was awarded the Felix and Helene Deutsch Scientific Prize by the BPSI, and after numerous journal articles on nightmares in children and adults he wrote his first book, *Nightmares and Human Conflict*, which was published by Little, Brown in 1974. His work on understanding the causes of suicide resulted in an acclaimed book he wrote in collaboration with highschool teacher Holly Hickler: *Vivienne-The Life and Suicide of an Adolescent Girl*. His Pulitzer Prize study of Lawrence was considered a gold standard in psychobiography and, over the subsequent three decades of his life, he was frequently called upon to write and lecture on Lawrence and on psychobiography in general. At the time of his death he was in London as an invited participant at a T. E. Lawrence Symposium held annually by scholars and students who have an ongoing interest in the life of Lawrence of Arabia. Jeremy Wilson, another esteemed biographer of Lawrence, who had invited John to participate in the conference, later wrote in condolence to his family, "John spoke with great intelligence and empathy. The effect was spellbinding."

Through an extensive portion of his career he wrote at length on psychological causes and consequences of international conflict and nuclear threat, publishing his insights in journals, editorials and the popular press. His life cut short by a driver under the influence, it is ironic that he also lectured and wrote about seminal ideas on self-governance as it applied to alcoholism and recovery.

His spirit and societal concerns were especially apparent in his social activism. His establishment of an academic department of psychiatry at The Cambridge Hospital, as much as anything, was about meeting the human needs of the severely mentally ill. Overcoming the early town-gown tensions to develop the Department, John gave impetus to a whole generation of clinicians dedicated to community care for the mentally ill in the Cambridge and Somerville area and beyond. A persistent aspect of his career was his involvement in international conflict, the threat of the arms race, and the movement for nuclear disarmament. He was not only involved in understanding the psychological dimensions of world conflict, but he was a visible leader and influential activist in this respect, leading to his cofounding in 1982 the Cambridge based Nuclear Psychology Program.

With all his clinical, scholarly, and political involvements, he found surprisingly ample space and time for his family and friends. He married his wife Sally Stahl in 1959 and started his family with the birth of their first son Danny while they were in Japan. Their other two sons, Kenny and Tony, were born after they returned to the United States. An involved and loving father, he enjoyed an active life with his three sons, two grandsons and extended family, including his sister Mary Lee Ingbar, his deceased brotherinlaw Sidney, and their three sons, David, Eric and Jonathan. They all loved and admired John and, indeed, had a very special relationship with him.

John had a playful and mischievous sense of humor, and had great enthusiasm for sports. The Red Sox as spectator and tennis as participant were his favorites. He was an extremely loyal Sox fan and oh how he would have enjoyed and wept for those champions had he still been here to see their victory. John in his personal enjoyment of the game of tennis was an intense and unyielding competitor. He was avid about movies which he loved to view with family and friends, and was unabashedly prone to weep on such occasions however slight the provocation, whether the subject was serious, or simply sentimental.

Family, friends, students, and colleagues sought him out for his unassuming but wise counsel. Those who turned to him learned that he was a friend who helped support their way with the challenges that they faced, and was readily available with his warmth and assurance in difficult times. An extraordinary friend, colleague, and teacher, John Mack was a truly visionary, caring, and deeply curious man who will be and is missed greatly.

Respectfully submitted,

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