

# Carol L. McAllister (1947-2007)

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What can I say about this dear friend as these different emotions and memories swirl through me?

I remember meeting her on a public transit bus, I believe in 1980 – when, almost out of the blue, she approached me and started talking to me about Central America. She recognized me from some earlier meeting on repression and revolution in Central America and wanted to know if, by any chance, I had been in the audience viewing a documentary on women in El Salvador that she had just seen (I hadn't) and if I would mind if she shared some thoughts about it with me.

This person struck me as just a little odd, with clear blue eyes looking out at me so vibrantly through wire-rimmed glasses, with fairly short blondish-brownish hair, incredibly animated, perhaps a bit geeky but also very bright and articulate and interesting. No, I wouldn't mind if she shared her thoughts with me, and, yes, I would try to give her feedback on what she was saying. I had no idea that she would become one of the most important people in my life. We became involved in 1983 in a relationship that ended in 1999.

More than a quarter of a century later this initial connection, I returned from a national anti-war demonstration to learn from my friend, comrade, and step-son Jonah McAllister-Erickson that his mom, Carol McAllister, passed away at about 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, September 15<sup>th</sup>, in Shadyside Hospital. They were just ending a pleasant visit, and her dinner had been brought in. She indicated that she was tired and wanted to rest for a few minutes before eating. She closed her eyes, her breathing became a little irregular, and then her heart stopped beating.

Carol had been hit by breast cancer a number of years ago — and for a time she had beaten it. A little over a year ago, it returned. A couple of weeks ago, it became evident that she was now engaged in her final battle with cancer, although it was not clear whether this would last for days, weeks, or months, and she had recently expressed a wish that her final days would not be spent in pain.

For a number of years Carol was active in movements for social justice — anti-war struggles, anti-racist struggles, women's liberation struggles, and more. Once a "new left" activist, Carol became a revolutionary Marxist while in Pittsburgh — briefly as a member of the Socialist Workers Party, then for a number of years as a member of the Fourth Internationalist Tendency (as one of its representatives, she attended the 1991 World Congress of the Fourth International, a global network of revolutionary socialist groups), and later, again for a short time, as a member of Solidarity. She was also a very fine anthropologist, researcher, and teacher at the University of Pittsburgh, with a joint appointment in the Graduate School of Public Health and the Department of Anthropology, and later with the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs.

Since the mid-1990s, she had also connected with spiritual and progressive-Christian currents that were very much in harmony with all that she was and had been. A reverence and joy in relation to all of creation – reflected in her love for gardening, camping, hiking, canoeing, running, photography, music, poetry, and other creative interactions with the world around her – animated her entire life.

Carol just turned 60 on September 7<sup>th</sup>. She deserved more years, but she was also fortunate in many ways. She had a good life — with some truly hard times, but also many satisfactions and some happiness. She was a very fine person, with wonderful qualities, who touched the lives of many.

Carol had no brothers or sisters, but her cousin, Janice Kinney, was like a dear younger sister to her. Janice and her husband John were able to have a very good visit with Carol about a week before her death. Jan has also been able to be of help to Carol's mother as she attempts to deal with this terrible loss in the retirement home in which she lives in upstate New York.

## Early Years

Carol came from a working-class family in Port Jervis, New York. Her father, John, was a carpenter. She was extremely close to him but lost him while still a little girl. His death was brought on by heart damage from childhood rheumatic fever, exacerbated by stresses from his stint in the military during World War II. He should have been exempt from the draft due to his medical condition, but his humble social origins made it easy for the authorities to ignore this. When he died (during experimental surgery which doctors hoped might correct his condition), his daughter – who had confidently expected that her daddy would return miraculously “cured” – was devastated, and this was a wound that stayed with her always.

Carol's mother, Harriet, had to raise her daughter as a hardworking single-mother, for many years employed in a garment factory, while at the same time battling against government bureaucracy (ultimately with success) for the full benefits due to John McAllister's family. By her own account, Carol was not an easy child to raise. In her was combined a vibrant and self-expressive temperament, an unquenchable curiosity, and a quirky sense of adventure. The first time she broke her arm was in an extremely optimistic decision to learn how to fly. A few years later, a split in the Dutch Reform Church she and her mother attended caused her – for a short but intense period – to throw herself into a Christian fundamentalism whose spell was only broken by the personal lapses of the increasingly strident rebel lay-minister who had led the split.

The more liberal-minded minister and his family who led the non-rebel congregation soon exerted a more positive influence, as did a number of capable, caring, and liberal-minded high school teachers. Carol later described how her youthful “Better Dead Than Red” conservatism gave way to Social Gospel perspectives consistent with those of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. She was also influenced by the writings of such socially-critical authors as John Steinbeck and George Orwell, by the impact of such films as “West Side Story,” and by powerful influence of the civil rights movement. Carol's involvement in the high school yearbook committee, the year she graduated, coincided with an innovation that she helped to bring about. Each section of the yearbook had a picture of the “behind the scenes” people that allowed the school to run — janitors, cafeteria workers, maintenance men, the people who unload trucks, etc. But it got worse. She and another top student, entrusted with making valedictory addresses as graduating high school seniors, shocked the town of Port Jervis by lacing their remarks with critical social commentary (which persuaded the school administration to adopt a new policy establishing firm controls over what future valedictorians might say).

Carol was able to attend Cornell University because she had been given a scholarship from the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), of which her mother was a long-time

member. It may be that her modest background initially contributed to her inclination to see herself as someone not that special. In any event, others had to explain to her how unusual it was for someone to receive a scholarship letter allowing her to go to Cornell that was actually signed by legendary ILGWU President David Dubinsky, or for someone to receive something called Phi Beta Kappa upon graduation from Cornell.

When she told her mother, in the autumn of 1967, that she would be going to Washington, DC to protest against the Vietnam War in the March on the Pentagon, her mother responded: "Who do you think you are?" The meaning of the question, Carol later explained to me, was: Who are people like us to question the judgment of the knowledgeable and powerful leaders of our country? But, of course, Harriet herself had been questioning and challenging authority in her battle to get the government benefits due to her and her daughter, and also sometimes in battles with her employers in the workplace. And in later years Harriet confided to me how immensely proud she was of her daughter, who she had come to recognize as someone who was truly insightful, brilliant and admirable.

Much happened to Carol while studying at Cornell. Politically, she rapidly evolved from a liberal supporter of Democratic peace candidate Eugene McCarthy to a somewhat ultra-left opponent of what she was starting to refer to as "Amerika" - although the influence of the radical-pacifist Father Daniel Berrigan helped her and some others at Cornell to find their way to more thoughtful forms of activism. Her senior year culminated in her participation in a student strike, replete with building occupations and other actions that received national attention. She had started off determined to major in the sciences (in which she was very capable) in order to become a doctor, yet her interests shifted dramatically so that she graduated as an English literature major - yet by that time her interests had shifted again, causing her to pursue graduate studies in anthropology. Also during her Cornell years she fell in love with and married Robert Erickson, who was completing studies in economics, urban sociology and public policy. Her wedding announcement, which she designed, included a quote from Molly Bloom's soliloquy in James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "... and yes I said yes I will Yes."

The wedding itself, I am told, was a creative, outdoor event, with poetry and music, bright colors and flowers, and social consciousness. After this, Carol entered the Anthropology Department at the University of Pittsburgh, and Bob got a job as an urban planner for the City of Pittsburgh. In later years, he became a key researcher and advisor of embattled steelworkers in the Pittsburgh area who struggled to prevent the steel corporations' own callous and profiteering destruction of the steel industry. Some years after the end of his marriage with Carol, he married a former Sandinista militant (also a good friend of Carol's) and moved with her back to Nicaragua. Bob and Carol were able to maintain a good friendship over the years, and he was able to be in Pittsburgh with her and with Jonah in the final few weeks of her life.

### **Anthropologist and Activist**

Carol and Bob connected, for a while, with a fairly broad, radical "new left" milieu that was expanding in Pittsburgh (and elsewhere) during the early 1970s. Within this milieu they found themselves being buffeted by heady cross-currents of radical feminism in various forms, Maoist and semi-anarchist ultra-leftism, some incredibly heavy doses of sectarianism and factionalism, and sometimes a stultifying holier-than-thou "Political Correctness." Some of this caused them to step back from the radical movement in order to focus their energies in what for them would be more productive directions. She never became a-political, however, as manifested through her involvement during that decade with the board of the Thomas Merton Center, among feminist

anthropologists, a feminist women's music group (playing the clarinet was one talent imported from Port Jervis days), and other activities. And she was also deeply involved in a number of community activities in areas that she lived - first in Pittsburgh's impoverished, interracial "Uptown" neighborhood, where she worked intensively with young people at a community center, and later in community organizations on Pittsburgh's South Side (where she and Bob got a house in the South Side "slopes").

Carol's anthropological field work, during the late 1970s, was carried out in a rural area in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, where she lived for two years, with Bob joining her for a time. Unlike certain other areas in that country, the culture of Negeri Sembilan was matrilineal (that is, women had greater status and authority, with inheritance being passed through the female rather than the male family line). She studied the contradictory interplay of traditional matrilineal-communal realities, an increasingly fundamentalist Islam, and growing incursions capitalist dynamics in the life of a particular village. She and I got to know each other shortly after she returned to Pittsburgh, and in one of our discussions I described to her Leon Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development - which she excitedly grasped and made her own as she finally wrote her doctoral dissertation and a number of fascinating articles about Malaysian realities.

Her experiences were among the most valued and transformative realities of her life. She became fluent in the language spoken there, described with insight and passion the way of life she had studied, and shared stories about people there who had become friends - in some cases almost like family. For many years afterward, she loved to cook very hot Malaysian dishes. (I remember when a number of us were treated to our first Malaysian meal, which caused profuse perspiration, tears, and more to come pouring from almost every opening in our heads - but at least some of us were able to stick with it in order to learn how to savor the wonderful new tastes.)

One of the most wondrous developments for Carol in Malaysia was the fact that, toward the end, she and Bob conceived the amazing person who would become Jonah. This name - like so much else in Carol's life - was fraught with multiple intense meanings. There was not only a commonality with her father's name, but also with the name of a little boy in Malaysia with whom she became attached. There was, of course, the Biblical connotation (the story of Jonah being swallowed by the whale was one of her favorites), but also a connection with the marvelous 1976 film by Swiss radical Alain Tanner about 1960s radicals growing older, "Jonah Who Will be 25 in the Year 2000." (Her Jonah, of course, was 21 in the year 2000.) In a sense, Jonah - conceived in Malaysia, and born not long after her 1979 return to the United States - was truly a product of globalization.

The term "globalization" was yet to become trendy at that point, but Carol was especially alert to its realities. She embraced the amazing multiplicity of cultures, and often delighted in (and actively engaged with) aspects of their accelerating interpenetration and blending. She was not uncritical of all aspects of globalization - she disliked what she saw as trivializing impacts of Western capitalist commercialization. More than this, she clearly saw the predatory nature of multi-national corporations, whose profit-driven expansionism (or imperialism) she saw as degrading, exploiting and oppressing the rich variety of the cultures and peoples around the world. In the 1980s, I came to know her because of her (and my) growing involvement in the Central America solidarity movement.

Carol became a key organizer and eloquent spokesperson in what, from 1982 to 1986, was a very substantial and politically diverse organization that met every week (with meetings ranging from 15 to 50) to carry out educational, cultural, and political activities having to do with revolutionary struggles in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala to oppose counter-revolutionary intervention by the U.S. government in Central America.

## Socialist Movement and Beyond

From late 1982 until 1995, Carol was active in the socialist movement. She was drawn to the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) because she was becoming convinced that there was a need for an effective organization of revolutionaries that would be capable of helping to build popular movements in the here and now to oppose various aspects of oppression, injustice, and war. But Carol felt that it would also be necessary to build a political consciousness and experience among more and more people in the United States - those who were part of the working class and other specific groups oppressed under capitalism - that would go in the direction of socialism. (For her, "socialism" meant society's economic resources becoming the shared possession of all, to ensure community, freedom, creativity, and dignity for all). And it would be necessary for this majority of the people to organize and mobilize themselves to bring about such a reality. The SWP projected itself as being committed to these things, there were a number of truly admirable, experienced, committed people who were part of the SWP. So Carol decided she wanted to join with them and help with this work.

Unfortunately, the SWP was in the midst of a very severe political crisis. Carol found an atmosphere of increasing rigidity - with far-reaching political changes being engineered by a relatively new party leadership that was determined not to allow an open or democratic discussion. The revolutionary movements of Central American and the Caribbean (especially the Cuban Communist Party) were being stridently idealized, and the U.S. working class was also being idealized in ways that were not consistent with complex realities. Traditional perspectives of the SWP (from an involvement in broad social movements, to a commitment to building mass movements according to united front principles, to internal democracy in the party, to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution) were becoming expendable, as were those SWP members who resisted such changes. When Dianne Feeley was expelled from the Pittsburgh branch, and then when I was brought up on charges for expulsion, Carol had enough and resigned.

About a year later, she decided to join a small fragment of people (about 30 or 40) who had been driven out of the SWP - the Fourth Internationalist Tendency (the FIT). There were two other major fragments at the time. One was called Socialist Action, which sought to build an alternative to the SWP based on its interpretation of traditional Trotskyist politics. The other was called Solidarity, which sought to build an alternative to the SWP through a broader, more loosely-defined socialist politics. Those of us who were part of the FIT did not seek to build an alternative to the SWP. Instead we sought to bring about the reunification of the SWP as a U.S. section of the Fourth International, within a context in renewed internal democracy that would allow for a serious and open political discussion and resolution of the political differences.

At the same time, FIT members sought to participate in the struggles of our time, to carry out revolutionary socialist analysis and education, and also to participate as an organized group in the Fourth International. Among the most important qualities of the FIT, for many of us, was the genuinely democratic and principled way we functioned, and also the fact that there were a number of older and experienced comrades - George and Dorothea Breitman, Frank and Sarah Lovell, Evelyn Sell and Rita Shaw, and others - with whom to work and from whom to learn. Before going out of existence, the FIT doubled in size, carrying out a number of worthwhile educational and political projects as it did so. Carol became a key leader of the group, and also of the FIT's fairly sizeable and active Pittsburgh branch.

When it became clear to a majority of FIT members that the SWP would no longer be part of the Fourth International and would never allow for reunification, the FIT voted to go out of existence, and a number of its members decided to become part of Solidarity. Carol was one of these, although

there were many tensions involved in this for her. She was also part of a short-lived Pittsburgh Solidarity initiative to function as part of a break-away from the Communist Party called Committees of Correspondence. In addition, she became very involved in a hopeful (but ultimately failed) effort in the early 1990s to work with a number of left-wing trade unionists and others to create a Labor Party.

When her breast cancer was discovered in the mid-1990s, this became the occasion for Carol to “give herself permission” to leave Solidarity and organized socialist politics - although many of the core values and ideas that had animated her over the previous decade remained part of who she was. Among the publications for which she wrote in this period of socialist activity were the FIT’s monthly magazine *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*, the Fourth International’s weekly *International Viewpoint* (including under the pen-name of Barbara Wentworth), and Solidarity’s semi-monthly journal *Against the Current*.

As part of her dealing with the onset of her cancer, beginning in the mid-1990s, Carol became part of the progressive Christian inter-denominational Community of Reconciliation. By the end of the decade she had shifted to the First United Methodist Church of Pittsburgh, and was involved in a meditation group that met at the East Liberty Presbyterian Church. She also maintained, in a number of ways, longstanding commitments in the feminist movement, in anti-racist struggles, and in opposition to war and militarism.

Carol and I became involved in a relationship as we worked together to build the Central America movement in the early 1980s. We became comrades, co-thinkers, loving partners, and best friends in a marriage-type relationship for approximately fifteen years.

Highly intellectual, with a probing and wide-ranging mind, this was someone at the same time exuding a lively sensuality in the way she engaged with the world around her. There was her absolute joy of working in the soil, hands covered in dirt, animated with both the prospect and the elemental actuality of helping to bring into being an abundance of flowers, vegetables, and fruits. There was genuine exhilaration as she rapidly hiked up an incredibly steep, magnificently green mountain during a summer stay in Vermont. There is the vivid memory of canoeing around a large lake with her, in pursuit of a graceful heron, as she soaked in - with her eyes and camera - this creature’s quirky movements and soaring flight. Carol’s photographs often captured the complexities and amazing beauty of nature, but also of sometimes gritty urban realities, in certain cases beautifully engaging the lives and personal qualities of many different people, and embracing the wondrousness of existence.

When her cancer hit, I was able to be there for her, and was with her when her oncologist told her: “You should now think of yourself as someone who had cancer.” We both ran more than once in the “Race for the Cure” against breast cancer - although she, by far the better athlete, typically ran ahead in more competitive categories. To her delight, I also organized a cheering section for her with myself and her stuffed animals (Thomassina the bossy triceratops, Petunia the critical-minded but accommodating pig, and warm-hearted, slow-witted Bear) when she ran in the much longer, strenuous Great Race.

Although we became estranged in 1999 (around personal difficulties we struggled with but could not overcome), I have continued to love her very, very much. Through our son Jonah, who has remained one of my closest friends, I was able to stay in touch with what was happening in Carol’s life. When the cancer returned a couple of years ago, his love and his strength reinforced her own incredible life force as she sought to make the most of what was left to her.

## Enduring Commitments

One of the most important outlets for Carol's deep commitment to help bring about a better world was through her work as a teacher, first in the Sociology/Anthropology Department at Carlow College from the late 1970s, and then at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public Health in the early 1990s. Carol was a truly wonderful teacher, but she also became a wonderful researcher, doing cutting-edge analyses of such things as an innovative new facility, Woodside Place, that provided a wonderfully homelike environment - with many outlets for freedom and creativity, and a warm sense of community - for people afflicted with Alzheimer's Syndrome, and also with a program that was first known as Family Foundations, an Early Head Start Program.

With the onset of her cancer, Carol increasingly shifted her area of political activity from direct politics to supporting those who were more directly involved in day to day struggles. No where was this more evident, and no where did she make a greater contribution, than in her efforts around this Early Head Start initiative.

This program was designed to help families break through the many-faceted poverty cycle - seeking to help families with young children overcome certain specific problems and behaviors that, taken together, often perpetuate that cycle. Carol's contribution was to add qualitative assessment to quantitative assessment, through a multi-level participant-observer study of the dynamics and activities of agency staff, parents, children, and community. Such sensitive anthropological "thick description" could provide rich and useful insights that couldn't be gotten at through other means.

In this and in her efforts as part of the Women's Studies Program (including a stint as its director), Carol's critical mind, her spirit and compassion, and her keen sense of the interplay of such realities as class, race and gender enabled her to make outstanding contributions.

Later in life, issues of dignity for people in the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender (GLBT) communities engaged an increasing amount of her attention and energy. She was involved with struggles around equality for GLBT people at the University of Pittsburgh, where she worked, and within the Methodist community of which she had become a part. She became a surrogate grandmother to an adopted child of a lesbian couple at First United Methodist Church of Pittsburgh.

"Although she had stepped away from direct political activity in a day-to-day way," Jonah has written to me, "when confronted with bigotry and injustice, she was compelled to act even when extremely disabled by the cancer."

A couple of the last times I saw Carol were at demonstrations in Pittsburgh. One was the important turn-out for immigrants' rights on May Day of 2006. The other was the mass march and rally against the Iraq war of March 24, 2007 that drew a broad range of forces (Iraq war veterans, a substantial contingent of trade union members, large numbers of high school and college students, Black Voices for Peace, good representation from diverse religious groups, and more).

This last demonstration was especially gratifying because I was able to work closely with Jonah and other young socialist comrades from several groups to make it happen. I am told that Carol thought it was a wonderful demonstration, was very happy to be there, and was proud of the role that her son had played in helping to organize it.

I do feel that Carol is part of what we do as we continue the struggle for the kinds of things she believed in so passionately. I will always feel sorrow for this loss. I will always feel glad that she was (and is) part of my life.

September 19, 2007

(My thanks to Jonah for feedback and input on this.)