

The Daly Interview

The What It Was Is Not the Way It Is: A Personal Interview with Dr. Carl Hammerschlag By Cinda Daly

Carl Hammerschlag is a doctor, a well-trained doctor. He went to New Mexico as a newly minted physician from the Yale Medical School of Psychiatry and came to work with American Indians. "I wanted them to come to me so that I could lay my hands on them and make them well. And over the course of 30 years, I was transformed from a doctor into a healer. All of my old certainties were called into question."

An internationally recognized psychiatrist, author, teacher, and healer, Carl is an expert in dealing with rapid change and the vulnerability it creates. Both a pragmatist and dreamer, he weaves stories about his work with Native Americans, drawing parallels to the business world and to our personal lives.

His commanding cadence and deep, lilting voice kept me suspended on every thought, eagerly awaiting each word. I listened intently. Little did he know that our conversation was on the eve of my sojourn to help my sister beat her brain tumor, that pesky knot that reappeared after five years of darkness. Things have changed and will never be the same again.

Daly. "The way it was is not the way it is." This sounds like a wake-up call.

Hammerschlag. Yesterday's financial predictions seem foolish. So do yesterday's perceptions of war, the promise and danger of technology, and even about how we ensure our safety. Fear, cynicism and mistrust have been elevated to veritable art forms. Even children are afraid. Fear and terror are so co-opting our civilization that it is stealing our joy and compromising our ability to live together in one community.

The growth in our technical genius is astounding, and we get deluged daily by this genius. The task, though, is not transmitting more information or doing it faster. We don't need more speed or more lanes on the Internet. We need more rest stops, places where we can talk about how we are impacting our customers; resist the demand that somehow speed takes precedence over service. Talk about whether our technology is interfering with our ability to relate as human beings;

pay at least as much attention to the heart and soul of the human experience as to the mechanics of it.

So, the way it was is not the way it is. We can't live in the yesteryear. We can't be terrified of the future. We have to figure out how to live with what we are now and save ourselves. We cannot be crippled by our preconceptions and old ways of thinking that stifle our creativity. And, we need to get back to some of the things we used to believe in.

Daly. *There is a seeming contradiction between the underlying philosophy – the way it was is not the way it is; go forward – and going back to recapture what is lost.*

Hammerschlag. It's the counterpoint of life. The apparent dichotomy is that we have lost a lot in contemporary life. And, there are some things that have really not been improved upon that we need to regain, like honor and integrity. Don't lie or steal from each other. When we promise something to someone, deliver it. Dream, like in the Lord of the Rings trilogy, that the forces of good can win out over the forces of evil.

Daly. *How does that sentiment play with the cynics?*

Hammerschlag. Cynicism and mistrust have become the watchwords of our civilization. People trust nothing, believe in nothing. Malfeasance, lying, subterfuge are rampant in politics, business and sadly even in our religious communities. Things are not what they appear, and we present ourselves in a way that we might not really be. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about the president of the United States or Wall Street marketers or corporate CEOs or health care providers. It's problematic when patients are no longer sure that clinical decisions are made in terms of what they need but rather in terms of what drugs and surgeries providers can sell. I'm not pointing my finger at one industry. There is a certain ubiquity with this problem in our civilization today.

So, there is a desperation for authenticity. Are you telling the truth? Are you presenting yourself as you really are? The more we have difficulty believing what people say or what we read, the more important it is to have integrity. When we find something we do believe in, we will hang in forever.

Daly. *How are we going to do regain these values in ways that we can sustain ourselves both personally and in the organizations that we work for?*

Hammerschlag. Progress in technology hasn't necessarily brought us progress in humanity. Find a balance between the heart and soul of existence and the technology of modern life.

The business world can serve as the key bridge to help us recover this honor and integrity, to give us belief again. There is an increasing awareness of this obvious

truth. Corporations are moving toward becoming value-centered organizations, redefining their values and incorporating them into decision-making. We are moving in that direction because people want to be involved in organizations that remind them about what they believe and like best about themselves.

Daly. You have said that in order to generate new ideas, we have to accelerate the unlearning of old ones. How do we get caught in the trap that stifles new ideas?

Hammerschlag. We see the world through the veil of our own experience and training. Most of us find a way to look at the world by the time we're five or six years old. Lots of behaviors are established by then. The same is true of fact. We learn old facts, get an M.B.A at age 30, and then we think we've got it. As a species we tend to want to hold onto all that we know now. Then, we perpetuate that by teaching others what we, ourselves, have learned. So most of us hang around people who see it the way we know it, which convinces us that the way we've got it is the way it is.

Daly. What exactly do you mean by accelerated unlearning?

Hammerschlag. Unlearning is the process of getting rid of some of those certainties. We have to look again at everything we know. That is how we learn. Find ways to challenge our own certainties.

That's tough sometimes. We humans don't let go – not of old behavior and not of old facts. When it's time, animals let go. Deer lose their antlers; snakes lose their skins, birds shed their feathers. We have to be struck upon the head repeatedly with a two-by-four to see that the way it was is not the way it is.

Daly. How do we break this pattern?

Hammerschlag. If we're always looking over our shoulders, it's very difficult to unleash ourselves and make leaps of faith. There has to be a willingness and the freedom to fail. If we're creative and try new things, we learn that some things work; some things don't. Some people don't have the ability to explore and get beyond their limitations and take a risk. If we can't, we will walk, never run because we're afraid to stumble. If we're afraid to stumble, we won't ever take off because the faster we run the easier it is to fall.

Daly. Let's go back to your work with the Indians. What drew you to their community?

Hammerschlag. There's no romantic myth here. I finished school in the late 60s when there was a lot of upheaval. I didn't want to go to Vietnam; I didn't want to emigrate to Canada; so, I joined the Indian Health Service.

I didn't know diddlysquat about Indians. I always rooted for them in the movies, but beyond that – nada. I came into their world with the arrogance and certainty

that comes from being a freshly minted Western-trained. I was a bit of a schmuck. I knew everything. You could say that I wasn't very well received.

Then I saw things that I wasn't well prepared for. People were dying even though I was treating them. People would visit the Indian healers, the medicine man, dancers, and be well. Clearly, much was going on that I didn't understand and that forced me to challenge all of my old assumptions.

Daly. Share the path that transformed you from a doctor to a healer.

Hammerschlag. When I first arrived in the country, I met a medicine man who asked me where I learned how to heal. I gave him my list of academic achievements.

And then he asked me "Do you know how to dance?"

I didn't know what he was talking about. But he was clearly not interested in my credentials or where I got my degrees.

"You have to be able to dance if you want to heal," he told me.

I understood the question this time, and I didn't want to be caught short. So I said, "Yes, I know how to dance."

The man got out of bed and began dancing as I looked on a bit quizzically.

"Will you teach me to dance like that?" I asked.

"I can teach you the steps, but you have to be able to hear your own music to dance."

It was the most profound message I have ever learned. If you want to heal people, you have to know how they hear the music. If you can do that, you can expand your repertoire in how you heal them.

We rarely open ourselves to the way other people hear the tune, and we tie ourselves down into our own preconceived world. In the music box of our lives, we can *turn* the dial in our clock radio to a different station that still makes music. How difficult it is for most of us to turn that dial. Our task is to open our lives to the many stations that are in the music box of our being.

Daly. What is the meaning behind your book title, *The Theft of the Spirit*.

Hammerschlag. All kinds of bad things happen – political, economic, social. Lies told by people in positions of power, pointing blame to others, terrorist bombings. It demoralizes us, and we've allowed our spirit to be stolen in contemporary life.

But there is something inside of us, a spark that ignites even in the darkest times, which reminds us we can propel ourselves forward. So the issue is not whether, or when, stuff happens. The issue is the way you come to that stuff – how you deal with the crisis, whether ordinary or catastrophic – when it does happen. If you come with the good spirit, the ineffable quality within, you will move forward and grow.

Daly. Most of us have not had a life changing adventure like you have had. Help us get to this place intellectually.

Hammerschlag. All of us face one sooner or later. We lose a child or a parent. We become diabetic. Something forces us to look again at what are we doing, what's really important. We have to seek out these events that force us to look again. It doesn't mean that we have to get sick, but we have to be willing to suspend ourselves from the ordinary.

Accelerate the unlearning and get back to those things that don't just touch our technology, but touch our soul and sustain our healing spirit.

Work for people who reflect your own integrity and values. Be associated with a values-driven company where *who* you are makes a difference in what you represent and what you promise is what you're going to deliver. Your customers are looking for that. When they find it, they will become very loyal customers.

These are crucially important to living an effective life. Sooner or later stuff will happen. The more connected we are with people who kindle our own spirit, our internal light, the better we will deal with what we have to come to.

Daly. You talk about trusting in our unconscious mind. How do we get in touch with that place?

Hammerschlag. Most of us trust the conscious mind. It is one of the unfortunate concomitants of the industrial/scientific revolution. If you can prove it, know it with your head, it's great. If you know it because you feel it in the core of your being, it is less trustworthy. We have separated the head from the heart and believe that the whole world is a Cartesian equation: for every effect there is a definitive cause.

Our inability to explain certain things is viewed as nothing more than our inability to articulate the right question. When we can articulate the right question, we will know the answer to that, too. This cognitive reality reduces the world to a single dimension.

The really important questions don't get answered in just one way. What are we doing here? What is the meaning of life? Of death? Two people with the same disease. One dies; the other thrives. You're a flight attendant scheduled for a flight from Boston, headed west, that ends up in the World Trade Center, and you missed that flight because your child had the flu. How do you explain that? Or you're a guy who works on the 102nd floor of the World Trade Center, who has not been late for

work in years, who was running ten minutes late taking his son to school, got caught in traffic and arrived at the Towers just after the explosion. How do you explain that?

These existential questions – the serendipitous – have no answers. We need to trust more in the intuitive aspects of our being. It allows us hope to be creative, to get beyond our limitations, to take leaps of faith. There is more to the outcome than facts.

Daly. Will you close with one more story?

Hammerschlag. I just got back from California last night visiting my mother who is dying of congestive heart failure. She has a badly leaking heart valve, and she is always short of breath. It was her 90th birthday, and she just wanted to celebrate. “I want to have a big birthday party,” my mother said. “I want there to be music – a band. We should *all* be short of breath from dancing with joy.” It’s how you come to what you’ve got. Come to dance; come with joy.

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