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Power of a Poet: Karl Williams

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I remember with fondness the cluster of self-advocacy groups that organized in and around Philadelphia in the 1980s. Most of these associations of persons with intellectual disabilities springing up across America at that time called themselves “People First” organizations, but not this group. It chose an action title: “Speaking for Ourselves.” After all, wasn't this the basic, down-to-earth goal the members longed for so deeply?

Then, in the late 1980s, the members of Speaking for Ourselves decided that every great movement needed a rallying song. After all, if the alumni of Notre Dame's “Fighting Irish” could sing their enthusiastic support for their teams, why couldn't self-advocates sing with the same gusto to buck up and hold together their members?

At that time, a soft-spoken young man worked as a supporter of Speaking for Ourselves. Karl Williams is a man with better than a decade of hands-on service to these individuals. He knew what they wanted, so he wrote a song. While strumming chords on his guitar, he sang it to them. The chorus was simple and straight to the point:

**We are speaking for ourselves
Speaking for ourselves
No one else can do as well
Speaking for ourselves.**

The members loved it. The song contained that same soft mixture of thought-provoking message and arresting harmony that was typical of Simon and Garfunkel.

The chorus was easy to memorize. The members sang it in their local groups. At times when all of the groups came together, they sang it religiously at the opening and closing of the meeting. The song contained three stanzas that pinpointed the perplexities these persons faced every day.

Fright

This first stanza spoke of the unspeakable fear that often lurked in the minds of every self-advocate:

**Once I was afraid to speak
I was lonely I was weak
With a voice so very small
That I had no voice at all.**

Comradeship

The second stanza enabled each member to sing about the invigorating closeness they found in their togetherness:

**Then I found a friend like me
And another made us three
And we laughed and then we cried
And this is what we tried.**

Sheer Guts

In the final lines, the members of Speaking for Ourselves sang about facing the toughest perplexities of their lives head-on:

**We've been called by many names
We've been made to feel ashamed
We've been locked behind a door
But we'll come outside once more.**

Scorn Not This Simplicity

Many of us have acquired certain professional ways of speaking and we are often graded on how well we speak to others who know the same “bureaucratese.” It works well in some occasions. There are times, however, when certain perplexities lock us up in our own jargon. Consequently, my friend, sociologist Richard Voorhees constantly reminds me that good poets and songwriters may rescue us from our entangling times with fresh, simple, lilting, down-to-earth words.

Interestingly, since Karl Williams wrote this first song, he has soared as a composer, poet, and author. He created a complete album, *Respect: Songs of the Self-Advocacy Movement* that was a candidate for Best Contemporary Folk Album in the 1998 Grammy Awards. He won three

American Society of Composers and Authors (ASCAP) awards. He has written two as-told-to books. One of them was *Lost in a Desert World* (Williams, 1999). It featured the late Roland Johnson, a nationally famous self-advocate who got his start as a member of Speaking for Ourselves. *Publishers Weekly* (2001) writers spoke glowingly of Williams' songs and how they can touch the hearts of families and children. One specific example was noted in the children's category: "Big fish eat little fish in the ocean and the bay/Big fish eat little fish every night and every day/ Big fish eat little fish that's what they say/But I hope the little fish get away." The many creations of this songwriter and poet can be discovered by going to karlwilliams.com.

The success of Williams makes me wonder whether there are other artists in our field like him. If so, would this *Journal* become richer and more enlightening if the best poems and songs about human conditions of the persons we work with and care about were published?

References

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Karl Williams

Author: Robert Perske: Citizen Advocate and Writer,
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William Carlos Williams, the poet, novelist and playwright, was born in 1883 in Rutherford, New Jersey. After Swiss, Parisian and New York schools he studied medicine at Pennsylvania University, and later in New York and Leipzig. He settled as a G.P. in Rutherford in 1909, the year of his first book, *Poems*. An early friend of Ezra Pound's, he was deeply influenced by Imagism, and this is reflected in *Poems* and *The Tempers* (1913). But he soon began to launch his own campaign to 'create somehow by intense, individual effort, a new -an American - poetic language'. In 1920 he wrote, *Til write whatever I damn please, whenever I damn please, and as I damn please*. William Carlos Williams (September 17, 1883 – March 4, 1963) was a Puerto Rican-American poet, writer, and physician closely associated with modernism and imagism. In addition to his writing, Williams had a long career as a physician practicing both pediatrics and general medicine. He was affiliated with Passaic General Hospital, where he served as the hospital's chief of pediatrics from 1924 until his death. The hospital, which is now known as St. Mary's General Hospital, paid tribute to Williams... Power of a Poet: Karl Williams. March 2006 · Mental Retardation. Robert Perske. · Such is the case of the poem, "Valle de Collores" (The Valley of Collores), considered by many to be the national poem of Puerto Rico and of the author Luis Llorens Torres (1876-1944), regarded as the "Poet Laureate of [Show full abstract] Puerto Rico." The timelessness and wide appeal of certain literary works has been attributed, among other reasons, to the fact that they address universal inner conflicts that affect all human beings. William Carlos Williams, American poet who succeeded in making the ordinary appear extraordinary through the clarity and discreteness of his imagery. After receiving an M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1906 and after internship in New York and graduate study in pediatrics in Leipzig, he. · Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what you've submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! External Websites. The Poetry Archive - Biography of William Carlos Williams. Poetry Foundation - Biography of William Carlos Williams. All Poetry - Biography of William Carlos Williams. Britannica Websites. "William Carlos Williams" (September 17, 1883 – March 4, 1963) was an American poet closely associated with modernism and Imagism. He was also a pediatrician and general practitioner of medicine with a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Williams "worked harder at being a writer than he did at being a physician" but excelled at both. ==Life and career== Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey. · He also examined the role of the poet in American society and famously summarized his poetic method in the phrase "No ideas but in things" (found in his poem "A Sort of a Song" and repeated again and again in Paterson). In his later years, Williams took on the role of elder statesman and mentored and influenced younger poets.