

TAKING ANTHROPOSOPHY INTO LIFE: PART I

An Interview with William Manning

By William Jens Jensen

WILLIAM MANNING *has been a trial lawyer for twenty-six years. He lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, less than two blocks from the Mississippi River, with his wife Ruth Mickelsen and their twelve-year-old daughter Sonja Christine, both of whom are the passion of his life. Since 1973, he has been involved in Anthroposophy, which has played a central role in his life. Mr. Manning was featured in the book A Measure of Endurance: The Unlikely Triumph of Steven Sharp (Knopf, 2003), by William Mishler.*

The book tells the true story of Steven Sharp, a remarkable young man of seventeen who lost both his arms in an accident involving farm machinery. As his attorney, William Manning was instrumental in the successful litigation against the manufacturer and the substantial award that followed. Sharp, who grew up on a farm in a remote part in eastern Oregon, had always loved the mountains near his home, and spent much time there hiking, fishing, and hunting. It was primarily Sharp's depth and strength of character that drew Mishler to write the story.

William Mishler, who died in December 2002, was a retired professor of Scandinavian languages at the University of Minnesota. A longtime friend of Manning, he was also a poet and an anthroposophist.

Mr. Manning was kind enough to speak with me on the phone in February of this year.



W. J. Jensen: Can you tell me a little about how you came to meet William Michler?

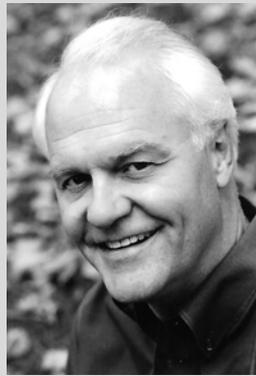
W. Manning: I met Bill Mishler as a result of being here in Minneapolis and bumping shoulders with people who are interested in Anthroposophy. There's a professor at the University of Minnesota named Roger Jones, who has written a book called *Physics As Metaphor* (1985)—he's sort of the local Fritjof Capra—and he had conferences here with Owen Barfield, and Owen would come here and lecture pretty widely

in the academic community. Bill and Roger were good friends, and I was good friends with Roger because of our mutual interest in Owen Barfield. I have a strong interest in Owen and have read all of his books. My wife and I went to see him shortly before he passed on, and we had a lovely visit. Eventually I met Bill through our mutual friendship with Roger.

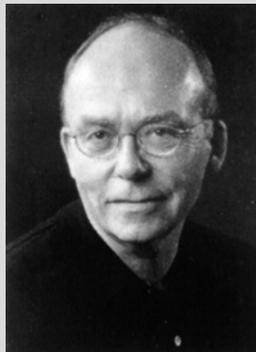
Then Bill and I and three couples formed an anthroposophic study group that continued for twelve years, the first Saturday of every month. It was a magnificent group. When something goes on for that long, it grows and you really come to know one another, both socially and from the standpoint of studying together.

Just one more thing about Michler. Bill was, to me, one of the smartest people I ever met—for this reason: he literally remembered *everything* he ever read. Bill had a kind of humility about him, and when he was in conversation with someone, he was a little incredulous that you had not also remembered everything you'd read, only because he couldn't understand why you didn't find it as interesting as he did. And I always said, "Bill, I found it as interesting as you did, but I'm not as smart to remember it—I wish I could!" But he was a person who was deeply interested. He could listen; he could absorb; he took in the world. But most of us are emoting and not really absorbing. To be in a study group with someone like that was magnificent, because he could always provide historical, philosophical, and cultural context to anything you were studying—and, as you know, when you're studying Rudolf Steiner, this can be exceedingly helpful.

Because of my friendship with Bill, he was aware of my case with Steven Sharp, and when it was over, he asked if he could meet Steven. At the time, he was sort of thinking about writing a book about Steven. After the whole case was finished and settled, he met Steven, who invited Bill out to his home in Oregon. So Bill went to Oregon and met Steven's family and friends.



William Manning



William Mishler



Steven Sharp

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Steven and his father asked Bill if he wanted to go fishing, and Bill said, "Sure." He thought they would go down to a stream to do some fishing, but he didn't understand. They got the mules out—four of them—and went up into the mountains for five days. Here was a professor with a dictaphone and tapes, sleeping on a stone and drinking old coffee from old coffee grounds, and standing next to Steven Sharp interviewing the young man as he was fly fishing. During the trip back on the mules, Bill was terrified, thinking he'd lose his life on some of the narrow ledges.

When he got back he transcribed the tapes and wrote the first three chapters, and after various publishers bid for the book, he received a handsome advance from Knopf to write his first book. It's really a fascinating story about Bill's ability to listen and absorb Steven—this seemingly ordinary person—and find that he was an extraordinary hero.

Before Bill met Steven, I was speaking with Bill after a study group, and I told him about Steven's dream, or premonition, which I hadn't told to anyone else. This intrigued Bill, because he saw that, from an anthroposophical point of view, Steven was foreseeing his life, as we all do at the beginning before coming into life—but we also continue to foresee it. And it was that one event that truly convinced Bill that this was a story worth telling. Being a longtime anthroposophist, Bill saw something that could speak to the anthroposophic view.

This brings me to my next question. As I read the book, I was struck by the contrasting views of Steven Sharp. On the one hand he was a typical teenager from a rural, western setting: he liked hunting, fishing, drinking beer, and so on; and on the other hand, William Mishler describes him as a person of incredible depth and strength of character. What was your real impression of him?

Your description is one I can adopt totally. I just saw Steven this weekend; he's now thirty, he doesn't drink, he's quite serious about his business of running a farm where he grows Christmas trees and some livestock. He also has some rental property that he takes care of, and has a few people working for him. But, anyway, when you meet him—both then and now—there's this extraordinary depth of character. Bill touched on that, where all his friends come around for counseling, and when he was in the Shriners' hospital, the way he was able to help the other patients; the way he was able to say in such a nonchalant way, "I am not my arms; that's not who I am." He

understands what that means. It perhaps comes from his heritage of a very spiritual background, from his grandmother, who was a minister of extraordinary spirituality, and his very devout mother. At the same time, he doesn't carry it on his sleeve; there's just his enormous depth of character.

Now I want to talk a little about you. First can you speak a bit about your own spiritual background, particularly Anthroposophy. How and when did you encounter Steiner's work and how did your relationship with it develop?

My first encounter with Anthroposophy was in 1973 when I was studying psychology, pre-med, philosophy. At the end of all that, I was doing a paper on Jung, and I discovered Steiner. My first book was *Cosmic Memory*, and like so many anthroposophists, you read the first book and say, "I'm home." Out of this realm of speaking, we know each other.

I continued to read and went to Spring Valley to live for two years and worked in Weleda and lived in the Fellowship Community. It was fantastic, because I met so many people—Marianne Schneider, Paul Scharff, Finbarr and Christine Murphy, René Queredo, Werner Glass, Alan Howard, Olive Wicher—all these people and more were giants and real keys in my life.

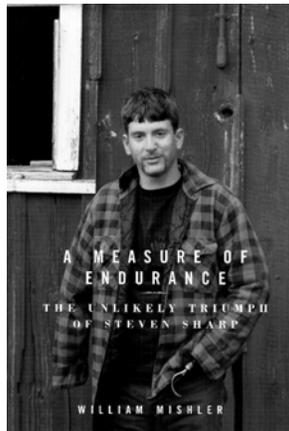
After two years there, I knew I needed to get more education, and I came back to Minnesota where my family is, and I've been very happy here ever since. I'm very happy and thankful for the influence of Rudolf Steiner in my life.

The general theme of this interview is really about taking Anthroposophy into the world. Would you talk a little about what this means to you and how you see this in terms of your work as an attorney?

Let me start with a verse, which to me is one of the most important ones from Steiner:

*More brilliant than the Sun
Purer than the snow
Finer than the ether
Is the Self.
The Spirit in my heart,
This Self I am
I am this Self.*

It expresses how, as we discover our being, we are so grateful. We all have the question: Who am I? And, through Anthroposophy, we can discover the answer. That's an extraordinary thing. Many people go through life, and they have the question, but they forget it or give up on it, because



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it becomes unanswerable, or it's an amalgamation of things.

But Anthroposophy actually helps us answer that question. For me, having had the gift of Anthroposophy since I was young, what I feel I've been able to do in my legal practice, and which is what I said to the jury in the case with Steven—and as I told the American Trial Lawyers' Association when I spoke to them—as attorneys we have the privilege to stand in the shoes of the person we're representing. For me, this means pushing my lower ego aside and being able to stand in the shoes of another human being. And I think that the more we can do that—whatever we do—the more possibilities there are. So what I try to do in the practice of law is to internally understand who someone is, like Steven Sharp, so that when I'm standing in front of a jury talking about him, I'm not talking "about" him, but I'm talking out of something that I've internalized.

As you say this, I realize that this is the great strength of the book—that William Mishler was able to stand in the shoes of his subject, and I really got a sense of the individual.

Bill and I have had this conversation numerous times, and he really understood it. This is the gift of Anthroposophy.

What are the most important aspects of Steiner's work that you'd like to see enter the larger cultural discourse, or shape society?

That's a fascinating question. There are, of course, many, but if I were to pick two or maybe three, first would be the elementary aspect of Anthroposophy. If the world understood the human being as fourfold—understood what physical, etheric, astral, and ego meant—and hence understand sleep and what occurs during sleep, an extraordinary thing would happen, in that we'd start to understand one another as spiritual beings. When we greet each other, we don't just greet the higher ego of another, but the ego of a struggling but elevated being. That's who Steven Sharp is, who you are, who I am—who we all are.

The second aspect of Steiner's work that I'd like to see more of, and that I'd like to study more when I retire, is the whole matter of evolution—the fact that we are fallen angels, not risen apes. If we could understand that in a new way that would be significant.

And the other thing about Steiner's work involves Owen Barfield's book *Unancestral Voice* (and, by the way, it happened to be his favorite book). He portrays the Christology beautifully there. If you look at what's going on today with the book *The Da Vinci Code*, for example, or Mel Gibson's *Passion* movie, you see people

struggling to understand the Christ event. It's fascinating that, by far, the best-seller is *The Da Vinci Code*—sure, it's a murder mystery, but underneath it is a desire to understand the event. The same with the Mel Gibson movie; people will go, wondering What happened? And I think, as anthroposophists, there are these three ideas we can bring to people, to the culture, and what a transformational effect it would have.

One of the tragedies of Bill's early death is that we had talked about just these three ideas and how we might work together to bring them in a more popular way into culture.

And how would you briefly explain or describe Anthroposophy to someone who'd never heard of it?

That's a fascinating question. We've all done it. One book I recommend to people—I think it's out of print, and I'd like to do something to bring it back—is Francis Edmunds' book *Anthroposophy: A Way of Life* [1982]. I think it's one of the most warmly written books on Anthroposophy because of who he was. I had the privilege of knowing him and his wife.

I've taken different approaches when I hear that question, but generally I approach it from the fourfold standpoint I mentioned, because it describes who they are as human beings.

I am concerned about anthroposophy. The world is moving so quickly that Anthroposophy is not recognizing anthroposophy in the world. As Steiner told us, yes, we can look around and see Ahriman incarnating all the time and present in all kinds of way, but at the same time you can also see this enormous spirituality going on. And I think that part of

our responsibility as anthroposophists is to recognize that. I'll give you a very specific example. One of my passions is the study of Nelson Mandela. The world can't really recognize what happened there; the world is dominated by a kind of caucasian view. Here, there's this incredible spirituality, with Desmond Tutu and Mandela and so on, and we find a majority who *forgave* a minority oppressor. This is the Christ being; this is love and an incredible selflessness that we try to come to with "Not I, but Christ in me" and "Not my will, but Thine be done." But here is an example of that being played out on the world stage in a way that is unimaginable and may never happen again. I think that our job is not to recognize this so much in ourselves but to recognize it in the world. What happened there is an extraordinary thing that we barely understand in the West. It is this kind of thing that we as anthroposophists need to study.

