

Tom Hunter 1946-2008

Keep it Going



On June 20 we lost an inspiring colleague, Tom Hunter, a song and essay writer, minstrel, lover of life, and champion of children and their teachers. Whether in a small chair on the rug of a classroom, in a gathering circle at his annual Teachers' Camp, or in front of a huge audience at state and national conferences, Tom's big heart, thoughtful ears, sharp mind, and playful spirit always touched those in his presence. Several generations of children have grown up with Tom's songs, learned in classrooms, church settings, or at home by parents who found his music added both sensitivity and joy to their family life. In addition to his many recordings, solo, with family, friends and also colleagues Bev Bos and Michael Leeman, Tom more recently began writing essays which were self-published by the Song Growing Company (www.tomhunter.com), with others printed in *Young Children, Exchange*, and in my newest book with Deb Curtis, *Learning Together with Young Children*. Tom also developed a DVD of songs to inspire mathematical learning for Teaching Strategies, Inc. (www.teachingstrategies.com).

In May, Tom was diagnosed with a fatal and very rare form of a neurodegenerative disease called Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease which rapidly destroyed his beautiful brain in the course of a couple of months. Tom's family generously shared updates on the experience of caring for him during his brief illness by setting up a blog where people around the country could post words of encouragement, photos, and memories of how he had touched their lives (www.tomhunterblog.blogspot.com). His wife, Gwen, and adult children, Aeden and Irene, read these to Tom each day and, with the support of friends, surrounded him with the songs, poems, images, and stories he loved. When you visit this blog you get a strong sense of Tom as a nurturer, community builder, and change agent. There are stories of children being reassured and encouraged to offer their voices; teachers being awakened to things they had forgotten about themselves or the joy available in their work; a principal who changed his whole school as a result of what he learned from being with Tom.

My own life was profoundly impacted by knowing Tom. The time he, Deb Curtis, and I spent together always included some ranting about our government's actions, our consumer-driven culture, and loss of Dr. King's vision of a beloved community. We worked together to peel apart the complexities of the damage we were witnessing by current trends in education. Often we found we were drawing inspiration from the same voices — Parker Palmer, Mary Oliver, Gloria DeGatano, Wendell Berry, Marion Wright Edelman, and of course, numerous children and teachers we had met. Our shared concern for the ways teachers are beaten down and robbed of their longings, led us to design presentations together focused on 'Nurturing the Heart of Your Teaching' and 'Strengthening Our Responsibility to Live Fully and Teach Well'. Whether we were on the phone, gathered around Deb's kitchen table, at an airport gate, or in front of a big crowd together at a conference, the twinkle in Tom's eye, and the language of music itself, expanded my understandings. Tom was a man not afraid of tears, vulnerability, or exuberant joy in children or adults. He nudged teachers to make room for children to be big and loud, to loosen up tight reins; he helped me digest that practice for my work. When I'd find myself discouraged, Tom's stories of children and teachers with whom he'd worked re-connected me to a sense of possibilities. He often pointed out little things I'd overlooked. I can still hear his repeated phrase — "It Matters!"

Tom's family has shared another phrase for us to consider. Tom had already lost his sight and most of his speech as they huddled together trying to comprehend what this fatal disease would mean for their lives. One of the clearest phrases to come from him was "Keep it going!" Those of us touched by Tom's life and work have the opportunity now to do just that. In addition to keeping his music and stories alive, and making contributions to his family to support their financial challenges at this time, each of us can continue the work of taking children's voices out in the world to guide our living. We can work to ensure that teachers' voices are taken seriously as educational policies are developed. And we can re-commit ourselves to building strong, beloved communities wherever we are.

You can keep abreast of the ongoing concerts and fundraising efforts to Keep it Going on Tom's web site. Watch for news of a special tribute to Tom at this year's NAEYC conference in Dallas.

— *Contributed by Margie Carter*

Please watch the Exchange web site — www.ChildCareExchange.com — and *ExchangeEveryDay* for news of tributes for Tom Hunter. Tom's books and CDs may be ordered from www.tomhunter.com/store.htm