November 18, 1998. Interview with Ronald Carson, PhD. Professor of Medical Humanities and Director, Institute for Medical Humanities, University of Texas, Galveston. The interview is being conducted by Judith Swazey at the Institute for Medical Humanities.

Swazey: Tell me about your family background, Ron.

Carson: I grew up in a little town in Indiana, 10,000 people then, 10,000 people now, in the 40s and 50s. I was born in 1940. My parents still live about 3 blocks from where I lived when I was born. My parents were, I suppose you would say, middle class. We always had enough; my 6-year younger sister, my parents, and I. Both my parents worked. Everybody worked. It was part of that ethos, digging in as soon as you can. You do well in school, you keep your nose clean, you get a job as soon as you can, you pay your own way, you begin to become self reliant pretty quickly. I look back and wonder about what they were able to pull off. I don’t mean to make this sound like an idyllic childhood. I was loved and supported. Within my parents means, I was given what I needed to flourish, and was expected to flourish. Not to become anything in particular, but to make something of myself.

Swazey: Be the best you can be.

Carson: That kind of thing. The kind of thing that nowadays has been trivialized, it almost
sounds cliched. I had an ordinary childhood and adolescence and went off to
college.

Swazey: Did you have a strong religious grounding as you grew up?

Carson: I did. That takes a little explanation. Church was American Baptist Church. Here
it is important to distinguish American Baptist from Southern Baptist; I’m
speaking now from the south. It’s clear to me now, but it was not then. I had no
reason to make these distinctions then. Southern Baptists tend to be quite
conservative, even fundamentalist in orientation. There are the National Baptists,
which are the black Baptists traditionally. Then there are the American Baptists.
When people say Baptist, I think they tend to think Southern Baptist without
making the distinction. The American Baptist Convention belongs to the free
church, Protestant tradition. No hell fire and damnation. At its worst, it’s
saccharine. At its best, it’s neighborliness, self-reliance, look out for the
underdog, it’s the Sermon on the Mount. I was socialized religiously in that kind
of environment. I went to church every Sunday and participated in the youth
fellowship programs and the like. Went to church camp in the summer a couple
of times, in the formative, early years. So yes, I was raised in a particular
religious background. That said, my parents were not pious people. I wouldn’t
call them worldly, either, but they took their religion seriously. Church was
family; church was small town. My religious upbringing taught me to be other-directed.

Swazey: Sounds like New England Congregationalism.

Carson: The little town of Lebanon, Indiana was a marvelous place to grow up for many reasons, but I got out and about, again thanks to my parents. We took summer trips which they usually couldn’t afford, but we did it anyway, somehow. We drove all over this country. We crisscrossed this country. I had a pretty good sense, by the time I graduated from high school, of how big this place is, and how various it is, and how many different ways there are of slicing things. I think the religious upbringing, the strong sense of family (I had a big extended family in this small town, uncles, aunts, grandparents, all within a 30 mile radius) and then the travel, the branching out from that, not cocooned, but from a small safe environment out to the world (the world being the United States, I hadn’t yet left the country) taught me, imperceptibly, things like tolerance. There were only 2 black families in Lebanon, Indiana, this is the 1940s and 50s. I went to school with the Scott family and the Booth family, played football with Morris Booth who later went off to get a good job in the civil service, became a postman in Indianapolis. You can tell from this kind of story this is pre-civil rights. And it’s not the South, although it’s a part of the world which, unbeknownst to me at the
time, had an active Klan, and the rest. I’d been around, let’s say, within limits, by
the time I graduated from high school.

Then I went off to college. I went to college 60 miles from home, which
suggests something. My horizons at the time were limited. I don’t regret that. I
don’t apologize for it. I look back on it as sort of a natural development. I see
now what was going on. I didn’t know what was going on then. I applied to
colleges in my state. For some reason, I think my parents wanted me to go to a
private school. There was talk of liberal arts and the importance of that, not
wanting me to get sucked up into big university life, Indiana University or Purdue
University. Purdue was only 25 miles away but that was for engineers. My parents
had not gone to college, I’m the first person in my family to have graduated from
college. I had an uncle who started college and dropped out, but in this big
extended family, I’m the only one who graduated from college. I went to Franklin
College in Franklin, Ind., which was at the time, more so than now, pretty closely
related to the American Baptist tradition. It wasn’t a religious school. Chapel was
required though that was not enforced. There was fraternity life, heavy drinking.
It wasn’t a sheltered environment, but it was a place where one could get a decent
liberal arts education.

Swazey: What attracted you to philosophy as a major in college?
It was really religion. It was people and ideas, I think, in a word. I’m not even sure it was possible at the time to major in religion or I might have. It was probably at a time when philosophy and religion, as was happening in lots of little liberal arts colleges, were being amalgamated into a philosophy and religion, or just philosophy, department. It was ideas, and I’m not sure I have fully explored what the ideas were that sort of tugged at me. But it was a familiarity with the ideas I had grown up with, along with a growing critical sense of what I had learned without knowing I had learned it about my own values and beliefs that were coming under scrutiny. I wanted to test them. This wasn’t very self-conscious at the time but I wanted to take a religion course and a philosophy course. They were requirements, after all; this was before distribution requirements were dispensed with in college curricula, so there were requirements in the sciences and humanities and so on. I had taken the introductory courses and found myself drawn to what I later discovered to be the humanities. Religion, philosophy, English, history, politics. I still see my politics professor standing at the front of the class and lecturing. She was a marvelous lecturer. I still have the text book for that class, Social and Political Thought. I wasn’t yet politicized myself, but I was fascinated by political ideas, what the Brits still call politics and we call political science. What drew me to philosophy is, I guess, what drew me to the humanities. It was people and ideas. There was, in addition to the woman who taught politics, a religion professor who was just
superb. He was a preacher. He inspired me. And a young philosophy professor, just out of Oxford, first job, who taught me Kant, and I remember at the time that this was a whole new world. I was just fascinated by the ideas.

Swazey: Probably the most exciting time of your life.

Carson: Yes, my naivete, though it wasn't that I was inexperienced. I had been around a little, worked in a factory in the summers during my high school years and as my dad says, learned a lot about the lives of working people, he himself having come through a blue collar track into a white collar job; but also, as he says, having learned that wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. So if I ever had any doubts about going on to college or getting an education, I was spurred from behind by my experience. When I was 18 years old, I hadn't engaged ideas, not until I got to college. I had 3 or 4 good high school teachers, but...

Swazey: I think you are probably right. The very large majority of people at age 18 don't know what they want to do.

Carson: If somebody had asked me then what ideas really interest you or what ideas motivate you, I probably would have said, "what do you mean by ideas?"
Swazey: Yeah, right! There's a familiar blank on the tape. Did you take the psychology minor for the same reason?

Carson: I was interested in people, what makes them tick. I wasn't drawn to psychology because I knew anything about aberrations of the mind or anything. It was wanting to know what makes people tick, myself included. Although I wasn't troubled, I wasn't trying to figure myself out in any but a most ordinary sense of self-discovery.

Swazey: Was the year in Germany, while you were in college, to learn German?

Carson: It was, again, people who drew me into that. How did I get to Germany from a college that didn't have an exchange program? A woman who had graduated a couple of years ahead of me in high school went to Germany from her university and came home and our two families got together at Christmas and she showed slides. It was just a couple families at a Christmas gathering. I was just so taken by what I was seeing there, by this other world, that I just told my parents, probably in the car on the way home, "I'd love to do that." And being the dear people they are, probably after I went to bed, they said "suppose we can make this happen somehow?" So I went back after the break and made an appointment with the dean and told him the story. He was a chemist. He looked and me and said,
“you want to do what?” I said, “do you suppose there is any way we could arrange an exchange? My parents are willing to take a German student in for a year and sort of be his parents, and I would love to go over there. Could I get credit for courses over there and still come back here and graduate on time?” He helped me make it happen. I had taken introductory German and done badly at it but it’s the only language I had taken besides Latin. So it was Germany because I had taken a little German, and had no idea what I was doing. I thought I’d go over there and speak German, and this girl from high school had been there and I saw it was doable and interesting. So I went to Germany my junior year. I don’t know how it was done, but I ended up finding a family, who had a son who came over and spent a year in my dorm room and my parents brought him care packages on weekends, looked after him, took him home for holidays, and I lived with his parents in a tiny little apartment in post-war Germany, this was 1960-61. When I say post-war, I don’t want to make it sound like ’46, but there were remnants of the war everywhere. This family lived in what we would think of today as a Stalinist-style building; it was a post-war, hastily put together apartment block. No frills, 3 little rooms, and I got his room. That’s where I spent the year. That year changed my life. It was an eye opener in a whole variety of ways. I thought I had seen different worlds in my own country, but I realized I had just sampled subcultures. Here was a whole different world. And again, I was attracted by the people, the history, I had to find out about the rise of fascism. I had to find out
about the rise of Naziism. I had to square my school views of evil deeds done by
evil people, and so on, with these nice people I was living with. It set me on a
whole new track of trying to understand historically, politically, and religiously
what had happened. Although at that point I was not really aware of what was
happening. My moral and religious ideas were deeply imbedded and unself
conscious. In many ways, those were the ideas that were driving me to ask the
questions I was asking. How could this be? How did this happen? This was
happening in the 1940s. I was born in 1940, but I didn’t really experience it. My
earliest memories are of lying on the floor, as a little kid, listening to a newscaster
named Gabriel Heater give the war news from the Pacific Theater.

Swazey: Wherever that was, because I did the same thing.

Carson: This was just mind boggling and ultimately liberating. I traveled over there with a
bunch of students from Depauw University. There was no way for me to get over
there by myself. I had to hook up with a group from a school that had a proper
exchange program. So I rode over there with them in cabin class on the Queen
Mary. The old Queen Mary, the one in Long Beach. I traveled with this group for
3 or 4 weeks just getting acclimated under the supervision of their German
professor. The second greatest revelation, after seeing a geography and an
architecture and hearing sounds that I’d never seen or heard before, the second
revelation was that I didn’t know how to speak German! I didn’t know how to order a meal! I was on a very short purse string so I had my work cut out for me. I started taking German before the semester began. I participated with mostly students from the Middle East at the time, in crash courses in German and spent the year at the University of Mainz. Then halfway through the year, I fell in love on one of those marvelous trips organized by German student organizations. The two organizers were from southern Germany and they put the American and the two women students in their compartment. I fell in love with one of the two women on a 50 hour ride from Stuttgart to Istanbul, and then 6 weeks around the horn, through the Mediterranean and back to Germany. You talk about having your life changed!

It was indeed a year, wasn’t it, Professor Carson!

Ute and I have been married 36 years.

It obviously stuck.

I won’t go on about that experience, but that year in Germany changed my life.

Obviously. When did you decide to go to divinity school?
Carson: This was in my senior year in college. I came back from Germany... maybe I ought to say a little about that senior year in college because, again, unbeknownst to me then, it became a kind of seminal year in my later intellectual development. In order to earn money to get back to Germany and get married, I worked full time, while I went to school, in a hospital. In the local hospital. I worked the 3-11 shift as an orderly. I was often the only male member of the night staff when I would do a second shift, 11-7, often sitting up with very ill patients, hired by the family. One of my most indelible experiences is one of sitting with the ex-governor of Indiana as he died, hired by his family for $10 a night. I still remember it, watching over him. He was in an oxygen tent. He was dying slowly and I was there in attendance. I would often be called, by nurses on other floors, to come and help them lift somebody or prepare somebody who had died, before the family came in. It was just a job but it got to me. I don't mean it got to me in a sense that it was more than I could handle. I guess my attitude was, "this is incredible." I wasn't reflecting on it at the time. I was sitting outside the door of a room, in a wheelchair, within ear shot of patients on the ward, trying to read my philosophy assignment for the next day and nodding off and waiting to hear a call bell and running in there. I was just working. My goal was to get back to Germany and get married. It happened to be a hospital. It happened to be, looking back, more often than not, dying patients. That experience sort of soaked in and
became relevant later, but at the time I was just trying to stay awake in class and
finish my senior year and get on with my life.

It was during my senior year that the chaplain of the college took 3 or 4 of
us on a trip to various seminaries and divinity schools and graduate schools of
religion, trying to interest us into going to divinity school. It wasn’t that I was
along for the ride, but I was trying to figure out what to do next. You graduate
from college, you have a major in philosophy and religion, a minor in psychology,
what do you do? I wasn’t being asked by my parents the way kids are being asked
today, “what courses are you taking that will get you a job?” Not at all. I truly do
not know whether they had specific expectations for me, with regard to vocation.
My mother’s father was a parson, a school teacher who decided, after he became
a teacher, that what he really wanted to do was preach. He died before I was born.
He died when my mother was in her late teens. I’m pretty sure that my mother
had ideas about my following in his footsteps in some sense. But I was never
pushed. It was never articulated. There certainly wasn’t any pressure, but I must
have felt something like maybe I could be somebody like that. She spoke very
highly of her father and I thought maybe I could do that. I think that was almost
unspoken. So I went with the chaplain. Partly I was along for the ride, it was a
lark. We drove off to New York and Boston and had a good time. Again, it was
people. It was somebody who took an interest in young people and their future
and wanted to expose them to some possibilities and opportunities that he felt
they'd be good at. We went to Colgate Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, NY. They put on one of those recruitment days, gave us a tour, told us about the programs and so on. There were a couple of speakers from the faculty. The professor of systematic theology, William Hamilton, gave a talk. I don't have any idea what he talked about but I remember walking out of that room and thinking I want to be like him. I don't really know what he does but what he said and how he was inspired me. I thought, "I want to do this. I want to find out what it is and then I want to do it." I applied to Colgate Rochester Divinity School and was accepted. I looked at other programs. I may have been accepted to a couple other programs. I didn't know the distinction at the time between university-based divinity schools and seminary-like divinity schools. I ended up at the latter but I didn't know the difference going in. Those three years, '62-'65, made me a theologian or set me up to become a theologian. In addition to Bill Hamilton's classes, all of which I took, I sat at his table at either high table or coffeebreaks, every chance I got to overhear the conversations and earn my right to participate in them. He was somebody who cared deeply about students so made himself available to students.

Swazey: In the much overused word of today, you see him as a mentor.

Carson: Yes, very much so. I spent 3 years at his feet, though he wouldn't like me to put it
that way, trying to learn as much as I could about what he knew, which I was sure
was infinitely more than what I would ever be able to fathom. In addition to that,
I took all the required courses, everything from history of Christianity to New
Testament, Old Testament, learned things that were later to become relevant in
my medical humanities career, hermeneutics, the interpretation of texts, the
critical reading of, first, ancient texts and historical texts from the life of the
Church, and theological texts. There were also courses in social thought, social
ethics. I didn’t know there was such a thing as social ethics. There were courses
in literature, one or two of which Bill taught. Another taught by a philosopher.
Courses with titles like Christ Figures in the Modern Novel and so on. I was
working part time and going to school. My wife, Ute, was working full time,
teaching, and going to school. We read a lot. We were intellectually curious and
were reading everything we could get our hands on, reading things to each other
from the worlds of ideas that we had inhabited before we met each other and so
expanding our intellectual horizons in that way. It was partly school, partly life,
partly a couple of internship experiences that I had. I did a stint as assistant to the
chaplain at the University of Rochester and that was fun. I got to interact with
students and experience university life from that angle, got to preach once or
twice when the chaplain was on holiday. That was ok. I entertained the possibility
of becoming a college chaplain. Then I had another experience, at the Atlantic
Avenue Baptist Church, which was a small black congregation on Atlantic Ave.,
in the early ‘60s. That was an eye opener. As a kid, at my parent’s prompting, I had gone to Indianapolis fairly regularly with our youth fellowship group, (they probably in fact led the fellowship group) to paint a room, or bring coats for the winter, into what later came to be known as the ghetto. It was just the poor black section of Indianapolis at the time. The East Side Christian Center. I had done things like that, but it was very much the middle-class white kid going over to the black community and bringing things and volunteering. But I had never really spent any time inside any place like the Atlantic Ave. Baptist Church, I learned a couple of things then. I realized the depth of poverty, what it meant, as best I could understand it as a white guy from the seminary to be marginal, an outsider, a have not, and to have a community where you could live, you could breathe, you could sustain yourself and each other. I also realized I didn’t belong in the pulpit of a black church! There was no way I could do that. The black preacher was incredible. This was 1963. Letter From a Birmingham Jail was probably 1963. About this time I went with a group from the divinity school and a couple of our professors to Washington to picket the White House. But the galvanizing civil rights experience for me took place the following year in Rochester, which was a Kodak town, a comfortable, middle class community, in a seminary high on a hill in a mock Gothic setting on South Goodman Street. Somebody got wind of the experience of a black woman, a recent graduate of the University of Rochester, with a Masters Degree in Social Work or Counseling Psychology, who
had been evicted from her apartment on dubious grounds. A group of us
seminarians began to talk about this. Shortly before the incident, the local
ministerial association had gathered in the dining room at the Divinity School to
decide what their responsibility was toward the community in this rising civil
rights era. Their decision was to hire Saul Alinsky to come in from Chicago and
help them organize the community. A few of us students had been observers at
that meeting. We now had to ask, “what’s our responsibility in this concrete
particular situation down the street from us? Do we have a responsibility toward
this woman? Are we a part of her struggle?” After having discussed this in the
classroom and out of the classroom with our teachers, our decision was to commit
an act of civil disobedience. This was really transforming for me. We spent time
under the tutelage of our teachers, learning how the rental system worked. We
learned words like absentee landlord, which we didn’t know existed. We tried to
work through the system to protest an injustice and were rebuffed at every
juncture. For me, the rationale for breaking the law was that there are unjust laws
and higher laws, and there are times when law abiding people have to break the
law for a higher purpose. We were learning from Martin Luther and from Martin
Luther King at the time that, when you break the law, you must take the
consequences. So we chained ourselves, black and white together, across busy
Genessee Blvd. at quarter til 5 on a Friday evening. We picked a time when rush
hour would be at its height. Two or three others had mobile bull horns and
walked from motorist to motorist, handing out leaflets. We sat down in the street
and sang "We Shall Overcome." To make a long story short, we were arrested,
booked, got great press coverage, which exposed the injustice. We were learning.

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1

Carson: It was an event that politicized and radicalized me.

Swazey: It’s interesting to see how many people in medical humanities/bioethics had those
kinds of experiences and also ones who didn’t. It’s interesting to think about
where they’ve gone with their careers. When you went to Glasgow to get your
PhD in the divinity faculty, were you thinking then of a career in academic
theology with an inkling that you would head off into medical humanities?

Carson: No, not at all. My entire graduating class, save one friend and myself, became
ordained and went into churchly occupations, becoming either pastors for
churches or assistants in larger operations. My good friend, Bob Nelson, and I,
again for principled reasons though we didn’t make a big deal out of this, decided
that we would not become ordained. I decided that for negative and positive
reasons. I was not impressed, and I don’t mean for this to sound hauty, but
mainline Protestantism, with rare and notable exceptions, I think, during the civil
rights era, was not deeply, morally engaged in the civil rights struggle. I wasn’t sure I wanted to be a part of that. I wasn’t sure I wanted to work my way into a career where I would be presiding over business as usual and over settings where hard questions don’t get asked and injustice gets blinked at. I don’t want that to sound self-righteous, but those were my thoughts at the time. I felt not drawn to that kind of work. On the positive side, the radical theology movement, the death of God movement, was heating up during my divinity school years and William Hamilton was at the dead center of that. Something was happening within theology and within theological thinking that was not just trendy but I didn’t understand where it was coming from and where it was going. Bill had invited some visiting lecturers, who were working in this field of secular theology, death of God theology, or radical theology. Among them was Ronald Gregor Smith, who was the Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow who was doing a stint in Chicago as a visiting professor, and had written some things on secular Christianity. Bill invited him over to give a lecture and got us together. One thing led to another and I learned more and more about his thinking and about the possibility of actually studying with him. When the decision time came, late in my divinity school years, about what to do next, it was more graduate work. Which I suppose was partly temporizing. But partly, I was now on an intellectual track. I was asking questions, I was more than a little curious about things, I had learned a lot and realized how much more there was to learn. I was asking
fundamentally moral questions. Part of being politicized was, I think, wanting to see ideas acted upon, beliefs acted upon. What's the payoff? Does this matter? How does it matter in the lives of people? To make a long story short, we wanted to get back to Europe, I was accepted into the program at Glasgow, I got a fellowship that made it possible to cross the ocean again. I spent 3 years steeping myself what the Scots still call divinity, systematic and moral theology. I was still probing after the meaning of the death of God. Nietzsche announced it most passionately in the 19th century but now I discovered an entire literature on the subject. Theology was late to the debate, as stands to reason. How in the world could you make any sense talking about the death of God in a theological context? The literati and the philosophers had been talking about it for 100 years or so and there were historical roots back beyond that. I spent that 3 years teasing that apart and ultimately writing a dissertation on Nietzsche's critique of religion and morality. And during that time, because the Nietzsche archives were in Weimar, which was then still East Germany, Ute and I spent a term in Weimar, living with a family in a tiny little apartment. They gave up their boy's room so we could stay there. We almost got them into political hot water because we got their name from a hotel clerk and it was all under the table. It was just, again, a whole different world. The remnants of Naziism were still there. Stalinism prevailed, this was the Ulbricht era. There was so much to understand...
A chilling world. It was a chilling world. So, to kind of speed through those three years, it was Nietzsche, the death of God, the understanding of what a radical theology might be, a theology with moral payoff and political teeth.

How did you then move into medical humanities?

I was teaching at New College in Sarasota, Florida, one of the so-called experimental colleges of the ‘60s, about the time of the founding of Hampshire and Evergreen State and Santa Cruz. New College was literally new, it hadn’t been around long. Because this was the era of experimentation in higher education, faculty were brought from Ivy League schools, people who wanted to try something new. Grants were gotten from big foundations. It was a heady time. I was one of the young Turks in my late 20s, the Old Guard was late 30s or early 40s, a young place. New College had gotten going with 101 class Valedictorians with most of them paid to come there. I was the Assistant Professor of Religion. This was late 60s. I still see the students lounging in my classroom, little classroom, 10 students, daring me to teach them something.

Medical students I was teaching then were about the same.
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Carson: Right! It was the tenor of the times.

Swazey: As our chairman, Norm Scotch said, it was like lecturing to the Farewell Symphony, as they rolled their pop cans down the aisle and slammed out the door if they didn’t like it.

Carson: Students came to me, as well, with their moral quandaries, to talk. I would often spin off reading courses, when a couple of students would get together and found they had common interests. New College allowed that, encouraged it. There were no lectures. It was all seminars and tutorials, in addition to the required courses, which were few. There weren’t even departments, there were divisions of humanities and social sciences and natural sciences. I was actually in the social science division part-time for a while. I did a readings course on civil disobedience and non-violence, for example, because 2 or 3 students came to me because they didn’t know what to think about the Viet Nam war, and how to stand on it, and how to think it through. I had them read Erikson’s Gandhi’s Truth and Dave Dellinger. One of the students, whom I’m still in touch with, wrote his conscientious objector application for his final paper for that course. Students were coming to me and I was trying to help them deepen their appreciation for and understanding of moral issues. We had what is now very common in colleges,
a January term. A young woman came to me who wanted to go to work in a hospice. I said, "a what?" She said, "a hospice." I said, "tell me about it, what's a hospice?" Her name is Shari Wald. It turns out her mother is Florence Wald, who was Dean of the School of Nursing at Yale and a founder of the American hospice movement. Florence Wald was a friend of Cicely Saunders. Shari wanted to spend an interim term in London working with Cicely Saunders. I found this all very interesting. I said ok, but you can't just go work for her. Keep a diary and and read Elixabeth Kubler-Ross' *On Death and Dying*, a book I had read recently, and Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilich*. Read these books, dig up anything else in the journals that you can find about care for the dying, but go work, empty bed pans. Go do whatever is required of you at this hospice and write about it, keep track of it, and then come back and write me a paper and sit down and talk with me about it. She did. Within a year, I was going to be in Europe for some reason. I made a point of writing Cicely Saunders and asking if I could stop by. I spent a half day at St. Christopher's and learned a whole hell of a lot, putting together what Shari had experienced and what I thereby had experienced vicariously with an actual visit to the place to the people and talk with the head nurse who took us around. Sort of another pebble on the path, except there wasn't a path there yet, a career path.

Swazey: Certainly pebbles from your college senior year...
That's right. If one thinks about one’s career in moral terms, these were pebbles on the path of that career. I began talking with my colleagues about this experience... And the Hastings Center Report was probably just starting to come out and somehow I got hold of that and began to read it. A sociology colleague of mine, whose office was right next door, knocked on my door one day and said, “Ron, you are interested in ethics and medicine and death and dying. Did you see this fellowship notice out here on the bulletin board?” Sam Gorovitz had gotten a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for the Council for Philosophical Studies to bring a group of people to Haverford College in the summer of 1973 to do a kind of deep dive into medical ethics. I think he was teaching a course at Case at the time... back when Ruth Macklin was probably a graduate student. Sam’s book, Moral Problems in Medicine, was in proofs at the time. I was the token theologian. I applied and got the fellowship and Ute and I and our 2 children at the time, a toddler and a baby, borrowed a car from a colleague and dear friend, because our car wouldn’t have made it, and drove up to Philadelphia and spent 6 weeks living in the dorm and interacting with 48 philosophers and a lawyer! [Laughter]

Woah!! You must have felt about how you did at the black church...!!
That’s right! But it was marvelous. I saw there might be something I could do besides teach religion. I was happy teaching religion, but this was a way to bring my moral interests to bear in a somewhat more concrete, tangible fashion. Here was, what we’ve now learned to call, a practice. Here were people engaged in the healing professions who were having moral problems. And here were we, who had studied moral thinking and moral reasoning, maybe we should get together. Half of those people ended up with careers that were sort of first cousins to mine, working in medical schools. I came back to New College in the fall and decided to create a course in medical ethics with a philosophy colleague, Bryan Norton, who has since made a name for himself in environmental ethics. Bryan is an analytic philosopher who had some similar interests. He and I hit it off and we put together a course which we modestly called Aspects of Medical Ethics. Sort of sidling up to it. We weren’t sure what this was yet. The Patient As Person was the cornerstone and we went on from there. I should go back and look at that syllabus and see what we actually read. One of the other exciting things, this is a digression, because of Tom Murray’s and my friendship, it was also at this time...

He was there?

He was there. He was an even younger Turk than I was. Still is. He was there finishing up his PhD in social psychology and teaching social psychology to
undergraduates. We became sort of intellectual soul mates. We found ourselves in conversations about things that led to one of the joint courses I taught with colleagues there. Tom and I co-taught a course on Camus. You could get away with this at New College. A social psychologist and a theologian could dream up a course on Camus and offer it and students signed up! Your literature colleagues didn’t say, “you can’t do that.” It was a humanities division and we could range broadly. I still can call up, in my minds eye, the room with the students lounging around, most of them paying attention, reading *Neither Victims Nor Executioners* and Tom and I sitting together as colleagues and friends, with the students overhearing and participating, seeing two elders really struggling with ideas. I was 31 or 32 and he was probably in his late twenties.

**Swazey:** You were a medium Turk. How often do students get to see that?

**Carson:** It was fun. The course in Aspects of Medical Ethics really got to me. I was beginning to enjoy this. Then the Institute on Human Values and Medicine of the Society for Health and Human Values offered small fellowships to interested people like myself, who were working mostly in the humanities, to see if they might be interested in a lateral career move. I’m not sure it was designed for that but that’s how I used it, and that’s how Bill Winslade, Larry Churchill, and a lot of people in my age bracket who are now my colleagues and friends used it, to get
from law, philosophy, or religion into the medical humanities. Mini-fellowships, which you got to design yourself. I got one of those and what I had proposed to do and ended up doing was to get a little release time with the money that was offered, about $3,000, as I recall, to drive up to Gainesville, 180 miles away, which then was the nearest medical school, and be a participant observer. Only not as a researcher, but with the view to earning my right to speak in a medical setting, just being on the turf, listening to how people talked, listening to how doctors interacted with patients, listening to patients talk about what ailed them.

I got 2 days off a week for 2 terms, and drove back and forth to Gainesville in my friend's borrowed car. I cut a deal with the director of the division of humanities to use the stipend to start a visiting lecturer series, which I got to run. Among the people I brought in was Alasdair MacIntyre. I brought him in at the time because he had given the Bampton Lectures at Columbia which later became The Fate of Theism. He was, from his vantage as a moral philosopher, trying to make sense of the death of God. That was wonderful to have him come in and ... 

Swazey: You were very wise to use the money that way.

Carson: I got to introduce him. We went to dinner. Alasdair, the provost, his wife, Ute, and I went to dinner. I mean, little did I know at the time... It's serendipitous how
people's careers... Who could have known that Tom Murray and I would end up
where we are today? Who could have known then that Alasdair MacIntyre would
get interested, for a while, in moral problems in medicine. If I had to count on
one hand the books that have made a huge impression on me and shaped my
intellectual life, modern books, contemporary books, After Virtue would be right
up there.

Anyhow, I drove to Gainesville where Sam Banks was head of the
Division of Social Sciences and Humanities in the Department of Community
Health and Family Medicine at the University of Florida. Sam had been hospital
chaplain, I think, and sometime in mid-career had gotten a PhD in psychology
and religion, and joined the faculty at the University of Florida School of
Medicine. He was one of the people involved in the founding of the Society for
Health and Human Values.

Dick Reynolds was Chairman of the Department of Community Health
and Family Medicine in which this division sat, and an early, I would say,
cautious supporter of the medical humanities. I drove back and forth from New
College, and followed Dick around, went to the VA with him when he took care
of patients, went out to the rural clinics with him, to Lafayette County on the
Suwanee where family medicine residents were being trained to take care of all
kinds of people, poor people, lots of illiteracy, lots of poverty. So I was a kind of
participant observer, taking all this in and thinking it all through during the drive
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back to Sarasota. A year later, a job opened up at the University of Florida. They got a big grant from the NEH to develop a program called Humanities Perspectives on the Professions. The mandate was to develop undergraduate courses in the humanities and business, engineering, law, medicine, and nursing. I went up as one of the first hires on that program with a joint appointment in religion and the medical school. Within a year, Sam Banks went off to become president of Dickinson College. I became acting director and then director of the Division of Social Sciences and the Humanities, and the rest is history.

Swazey: Carson becomes an Old Turk, right? At a fairly young age. Go back to how you think of bioethics, how you characterize it, then segue into the differences and interrelationships with medical humanities.

Carson: Well, let me start with medical humanities because for me, obviously, it’s the larger context in which I see bioethics functioning. Bioethics conceptually operates best within larger contexts. One of those contexts is the humanities. One could expand that even further and say humanities and social science. Academically speaking, it fits within the context of humanities, bioethics does.

Swazey: You said it conceptually does operate best when it works in this context.
Yes, because it is connected to something. There are other contexts. I’ve mentioned only the academic context. The other context is the context of medical care and research. One could expand out into the community, medical care not only in tertiary care settings, academic settings, but health care more broadly conceived. Those are the contexts in which any kind of academic work, whether it’s neuroscience or bioethics, belongs. It has a reason for being beyond itself.

One could pursue ethics for ethics sake. There’s an argument to be made there. But I don’t think one could pursue bioethics for bioethics sake. The end view is getting clear about moral ideas and problems in biomedicine and health care.

Bioethics is one take on that, one perspective among others in the humanities and social sciences. The medical humanities is the larger intellectual, ideational context within which bioethics sits. One of the reasons that is important is that it connects bioethics to the lived worlds of care and research and scientific advancement, and to well established, even if contested, worlds of moral ideas.

Does bioethics or do people doing bioethics see themselves in that larger medical humanities context?

Some do, some don’t. I qualified what I said before. I said here’s the way it ought to be set up. The fact is a lot of the work in bioethics, much of it, fine work, I’m not casting aspersions here, is disconnected from these worlds. It may be
connected to thought worlds but it’s not connected to life worlds. There is a sense in which bioethics, now that it has become professionalized and specialized, is at risk of withering because the dialogue is being carried on among bioethicists. Part of that is just identity crisis, trying to figure out what this thing is. In the heady days, you didn’t stop to ask what it was, you just did it. There were lots and lots of problems and those problems still crop up and you have to make a response to them. There was a little lull in there before Dolly when everything had been said, and said again and again. There was nothing new under the sun coming along. Thoughts among bioethicists turned to the thoughts of other bioethicists and there was a risk of its becoming cozy, quaint, and irrelevant to lived worlds of suffering, exploitation, and the like. So one of the reasons bioethics belongs within some larger context is that it needs to be connected, it needs to be dealing with practical problems. We called this relevance in the 60s. It needs to be relevant to something beyond its own disciplinary preoccupations. The other...

Swazey: Let me interrupt for a second, but keep your train of thought. You said it needs to be more than preoccupied with its own disciplinary concerns. Are you, therefore, saying bioethics is now a discipline?

Carson: No, I don’t think it is a discipline. I think it’s at it’s best when it’s embedded in the humanities, in a congeries of intellectual perspectives, in dialogue with each
other and with the inhabitants of these lived worlds I’m talking about. That’s kind
of an ideal state. When this dialogue works well you’ve got doctors and nurses
and social scientists and humanists, bioethicists among them, in this sort of rough
and tumble conversation about something, about how to take decent care of dying
people in our society, some pressing social problem. At the same time, you’ve got
bioethicists over here talking about cloning, rather more esoteric things that are
on the public mind because they’re in the media, not because they’re problems
for anybody in their everyday lives. Not that we oughtn’t to be thinking about
them and getting a head start on them, but they won’t change our lives too much
in the immediate future.

A lot of the work that goes on in bioethics is applied philosophical ethics.
Many people who do excellent work in this area are not tone deaf to virtue and
narrative and interpretive approaches to ethics. There is, however, a version of
applied philosophical ethics for which...

END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1

Carson: ...medicine and health care is little more than an interesting new domain in which
to do ethics.

Swazey: That certainly was true a few years ago for an awful lot of people, I think, doing
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bioethics from analytic philosophy.

Carson: Principles of Biomedical Ethics, which justly may be called a cornerstone book in the rise of bioethics, was, if you read the first edition, an analytic approach friendly to real world problems. But what Tom and Jim were interested in was careful analysis from a particular vantage which later came to be called principlism. It is an approach that sets out to solve problems and to reason one’s way through difficult medical situations in a morally principled fashion. It’s principles and rules applied to experience. As the second, third and fourth editions have evolved, what you are seeing is a thicker book. It’s more inclusive. There’s not a great deal of attention to virtue, for example, but there’s an acknowledgment that there’s more to this than the application of principles. Quite aside from the merits of that book, its influence has been enormous in the development of the field of bioethics. You’ve got to separate the two. The uses to which their paradigm, as it were, has been put are various and of course some people are good at it and some people aren’t. Some people understand the scheme and use it well and other people use it in a flat footed way. But even when it’s well used, it’s still an approach via principles and rules, which is to say, from my vantage, it leaves a lot out. It works, I think, extremely well, if you’re talking about, say, research with human subjects. When I give a lecture to graduate students in the sciences or clinical fellows headed for academic careers in
medicine, it is extremely helpful to be able to leave them with respect for
persons, nonmaleficence, etc.

Swazey: The mantra.

Carson: But really, it came to be called the mantra. I don’t know who started saying that
and then it caught on. Again, that’s the uses to which it gets put. Beauchamp and
Childress never meant it as a formula.

Swazey: That’s right.

Carson: It’s useful to be able to take one little quiver full of principles and walk into a
room of people who are going to have to struggle, who are going to have to be
made aware of and kept aware of, and appropriate for themselves and learn the
meaning of respect, and distinguish between their behavior in the presence of
patients and their behavior when dealing with subjects. If this is principlism, fine.

It is useful when you’re dealing with certain domains such as research with
human subjects. It’s also useful in teaching generally. When you’ve got a bunch
of kids who are up to their ears in medicine and they’re supposed to learn some
ethics, you have to give them something they can grab hold of.
They’re not going to sit and read *The Patient As Person*, unfortunately.

They are not. There’s no way they’re going to slog through that. Our job is not to water it down for them. Our job as humanists is to read that book, assimilate it, and speak its message in ordinary language. Bioethicists of an analytic bent take a different tack. Let’s get precise, they say. Let’s say what we mean and don’t mean and let’s be able to articulate that carefully. What do you mean by respect for persons? What are the limits of and purposes for autonomy? I have said this is very useful in certain domains such as pedagogy and human subjects research. But it leaves out a whole lot. It really doesn’t speak to human suffering. For that you need the humanities. You need history. You need religion, religious studies. You need ethics done from the vantage of sociologists and theologians and historians, and heaven knows, literary people. If I had to chose, if I were given one choice between a book like *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* and a novel of comparable length relevant to the subject matter, I’d plump for the novel in a split second. I am a teacher. I care a lot about how what we think and do as scholars comes to bear in the classroom, in my case, the medical classroom. So, what do these students need? They need to be skilled at moral reasoning. But they also need to be able to appreciate. Before you can get analytical or critical, you’ve got to be able to appreciate either the other person’s position, if it’s an argument, or as we used to say in the 60s, where they’ve come from, if it’s a conversation. If
the person you’re dealing with is sick, you’ve got to be able to appreciate, have
some sense of what that must be like. Now I can tell students this, but it’s likely
to go in one ear and out the other.

Swazey: They’ve got to experience it.

Carson: If they hear it from a writer who can develop character and have people
interacting in a believable world, that’s it. That’s a vicarious experience of what it
must be like to be hit by this acute event or to be living with a chronic illness or
disability or to be dying slowly, or just dying. So, bioethics in an analytic mode
leaves a lot out. As it became professionalized, bioethics lost touch with the lives
of people, sick people, poor people. That’s the end in view. That’s what all this
business is about. In the early development of medical humanities there was a
reformist impulse that’s kind of sotto voce right now. And probably that impulse
needs to be rehabilitated in an era of managed care when the threats of corruption
are different. It’s money now, not technology. Thirty years ago it was new devices
and stainless steel that threatened to get between us and our doctors and so we got
critical about that and learned to use those tools more judiciously in the service of
healing. Now it’s money that’s threatening to gum up the works. Certainly one
could think of individual lawyers, individual philosophers working this turf who
are reformists, but a lot of what goes under the rubric of bioethics doesn’t seem to
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me to be... I don’t know how to say this without making it sound... well, it lacks
sufficient passion.

Swazey: I don’t think anybody could describe academic analytic philosophy as passionate.

Carson: I guess my attitude is, if you do ethics in the health care arena, there are other
ends in view. You’ve got to do your work with a view to making a difference in
the lives of suffering people.

Swazey: To me, what you’re saying is one piece of what I think is a fairly complicated set
of reasons as to why bioethics has never really gotten involved in the health
care/social justice issues with very few exceptions. There’s Norm Daniels and a
couple of others and people have said well there was so much to do in the area of
autonomy and so forth. But you read Emily Friedman’s writings on... Do you
know Emily?

Carson: I do not.

Swazey: She’s a writer/lecturer in health care policy and she wrote a piece a number of
years ago called “The Torturer’s Horse” in JAMA, which started their issues on
the underinsured and the uninsured. I’ve never seen anyone write with such
passion, but she will never be invited to bioethics summer camp or anything like
that. It’s an absolute passion and she’s writing much more out of the humanities. I
will send you that paper.

Carson: I want to read that.

But I don’t think that a preoccupation with autonomy is the whole explanation for
avoiding all the social justice in health care.

Autonomy. Let’s talk about that for a minute because that’s among the principles
available even if you broaden the scope of the four principles of biomedical
ethics articulated and adumbrated by Beauchamp and Childress. You could add to
that list and make it as long as you want, but still autonomy is right up there at the
top of the alphabet and not only because of the fact that it begins with an “a.”
There’s a good literature on unpacking autonomy. What does it mean? What are
its limits? Beneficence and the flip side, nonmaleficence, play second fiddle and
justice hardly comes into the picture. Some authors tried to restore our
understanding of beneficence, but in a post paternalistic era that’s not what
catched on. It was autonomy. I don’t mean to minimize its importance, but it
leaves so much out.
And it's so American.

It is so American! If you think of autonomy in terms of negative liberty, what's the positive counterpoint? If it's not beneficence, what is it? What do you do after, to put it starkly, after you've stayed out of my business. Terribly important. Choices can't be made, we are not free unless we create space so that we don't step on each other's toes all the time, get in each other's face, but then what? In health care, in medicine in particular, the nature of the enterprise is doing something helpful to somebody and for somebody at the same time that you don't ride roughshod over them. Right? But simply be sure that whatever else you do, to do no harm and to respect people's right to self determination. Whatever else you do, do that. But that won't get you all the way to where you need to be in patient care or any other non commercial interaction.

I also think we've gotten all fouled up by talking about consumers and providers instead of patients and care givers. I mean, they're very different enterprises, and I think that fits in with choice. I can go out and choose what refrigerator I want, I can read the warranty. We've gotten all muddled up with what it means to be a sick person, and it's not the same.

Right. But the model we had wasn't working. The patient as passive and the
doctor as active. I mean, medical paternalism was due for a hit.

Swazey: Right.

Carson: But it took that hit. Sometimes willingly, sometimes kicking and screaming, reformed itself, more or less. People coming out of medical school now understand that medical paternalism no longer prevails. Now what? I think that question cannot be answered by bioethics. I don’t think it’s in the repertoire. I don’t see bioethics being able to accommodate ways of thinking interpretively and narratively, for example. I think bioethics probably ought to remain what it is and get accustomed to the fact that it is one voice in a cacophony of voices that extends across several humanities and social science disciplines that take health and health care and health policy as their subject matter. For awhile in the late 80s and 90s bioethics seemed to be outgrowing the field, and it still is pretty self-conscious about wanting to be head of the class. In doing so, it suppresses other perspectives. It threatens to silence the cacophony. I want more voices. I want to hear from everybody who has something to say on the issue at hand. If what you’re saying doesn’t make sense, we’ll tell you so. Then you keep us honest. How different is that from, “There is a language here that you need to learn before you can participate in the conversation.” Everybody brings their own moral languages to the conversation. Some of us are paid to think about those
languages, reflect on them, see how they work and where they fall short and write
about that. But this isn’t...

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2

Swazey: Because there is this cacophony, moral and otherwise, do you think that there
probably can’t be, and possibly shouldn’t be any sort of shared, across-the-board
form of moral discourse? That it’s healthier to have the different vantage points?

Carson: My own view is that the best we can hope for is to come to provisional
agreements about things. I think in an intellectually, morally, racially, ethnically
diverse society what you want is to have everybody have a say. Because of the
diversity, no party line is going to be able to evolve. If what you’re looking for is
some ultimate answer, some final solution, what you’re going to get is...

Swazey: Final solutions--that’s a scary one.

Carson: I don’t mean to overdramatize this but the search for final solutions will get us we
know where. In a time when things sometimes seem to be coming apart at the
seams, and change is rapid and rampant, it’s understandable that there are calls
for final solutions, the right answer, the absolute... “I’ve got it and if you disagree
Swazey: Or at least not let you sit at my table.

Carson: Right. It seems to me what one wants, whether it’s in a conversation between one doctor and one patient, assuming that still goes on, or among people at a town meeting in a democratic society, what you’re looking for is provisional, enough to go on. It involves appreciation and a capacity to listen to and take seriously the other person’s point of view, to get some sense of what it must be like to be that opposed to what you are for, in order to try to understand. The end in view being some kind of action but before we act, appreciating, discerning, interpreting, understanding. These are the skills that we need in the society as well as in politics and all the rest. Is it any different in the medical humanities or in the health care sector? No, of course not. You come to an ethics committee meeting or an ethics consultation, what you’re trying to do is understand. If you’ve got the thing sufficiently organized and haven’t rigged the jury, as it were, and kept people away from the table, you’re going to have disagreements, you’re going to have conflicts, you’re going to have people seeing something from all these different points of view, and what you’re working toward is a provisional sense that we can live with, a particular outcome for the time being which, as W. H. Auden said, is all the time we have. It seems to me it is that kind of realization or
that kind of acknowledgment that is required to do good intellectual work in our
time and place.

Swazey: Yes, but I think that, to me, is the kernel of my endless quest for interdisciplinary
work, which involves a shared understanding and ability to come to these
provisional and tentative ways of working, attacking things, ways of asking
questions, maybe even answering some. That’s different from multi-disciplinary.
People may never develop a shared vocabulary. Darn hard to do but it sure is
great when it pays off.

Carson: I guess I don’t think bioethics has been real good at doing that, generally
speaking. We can think of exceptions, we can think of bioethicists who are very
good at this. But by and large, as a field... it’s not a discipline, it’s a field.

Swazey: It’s very hard to give it a name. I’m beginning to think Howard Brody’s right with
this “30 year conversation” descriptor.

Carson: It hasn’t been very good at this.

Swazey: I know when I asked Howard if he considered himself a bioethicist, he looked at
me and he rolled his eyes and said, “Oh, God, why did I agree to do this
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Carson: "I said, “it’s not that bad.” But I also think what you’re saying is a more panoramic view of exactly the types of problems this society is running into and it’s also why bioethics has been very inimical to thinking socially or to the social sciences. There isn’t a fit, particularly with the ethnographic types of things that I’ve done as a pseudo sociologist, which is much closer to what you must do, but it doesn’t fit with bioethics, particularly if there’s a belief in a universalistic ethic for all people at all times.

Swazey: Yes, that’s not going to fly beyond Anglo-America. The conversation tends to break down. The bioethicists I know around the world who buy into American liberal or Libertarian ways of thinking are not representative of their cultures, by and large.

Swazey: No, I don’t either. I was very struck by a course description I just read from another institution with a bioethics center. There was a section on international cross-cultural ethics, and it said in the short description of the course words to the effect “we will discuss relativism,” although they didn’t use that word, and in parentheses it said “subjectivism;” and then, “universalistic ethic, parentheses, objectivism.” I thought, “what a fascinating example that one is.” It’s a long ways from a meeting of the minds for thinking socially in analytic philosophy. I can’t quite see your group putting that in a course description here.
Carson: No.

Swazey: Well listen, I’ve got a ton of things to talk to you about but maybe we should call this phase one of the interview, call it to a close so you can get to your meeting. We really would like to come back, because I’ve got a lot more things to ask you.

Carson: Good, I’m delighted. I’m enjoying this.

END OF INTERVIEW