

John Callahan—Author / Cartoonist / Songwriter

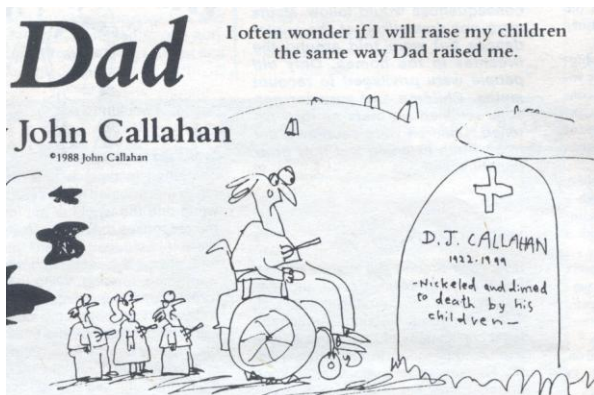
February 5, 1951 - July 24, 2010 (both Portland, OR)

In grateful memory © 2010 David Milholland

John Callahan is adopted by a Catholic family in The Dalles, Oregon soon after his birth to a young, unmarried Catholic woman in nearby Portland. Mrs. Callahan, unfruitful to that moment, almost immediately becomes pregnant and soon thereafter turns out a full complement of siblings.

The young Callahan, with his life-long mane of red hair, sets a quick pace for his provincial western community—a mischief maker from an early age. In one of several cartoon features we publish in *Clinton St. Quarterly*, John is pictured stabbed with a fork, as are all his five siblings, for breaking house rules laid down by their no-nonsense father.

Exaggeration? No, artistic license refined to a high pitch early in his career.



From the *Clinton St. Quarterly* feature – © JC 1988

Another *CSQ* feature captures the recent high school graduate working in the local mental hospital, now Columbia Gorge Community College. John and his late-night-shift colleagues learn all about and experiment with the psychotropic medicines they dose out, administer electro-shock therapy, befriend and befuddle their essentially incarcerated wards.

No wonder that John early on dials into abusive alcohol consumption. This depressing work makes any vision for the future far from appealing. His tales of bravado under the influence, staple yarns of extended

adolescence, catch the fancy of his peers stimulating even wilder bacchanals and near-mythic fables.

But this cycle fades away. The true opening of John's *bildungsroman* takes place on a Los Angeles freeway off ramp when John and a drunken-driver buddy flip and pile into oblivion. In the cartoon version, before discovering that he's paralyzed for life, John tells the attending patrolman, "There's a five-dollar bill in my left shirt pocket, get me a short case."

Needless to say he keeps drinking with lamentable results, until years later, in Mt. Angel, Oregon, John has an epiphany and puts the bottle aside, for good. The *CSQ* feature on this entire process "I Think I Was an Alcoholic" is a succinct masterpiece.

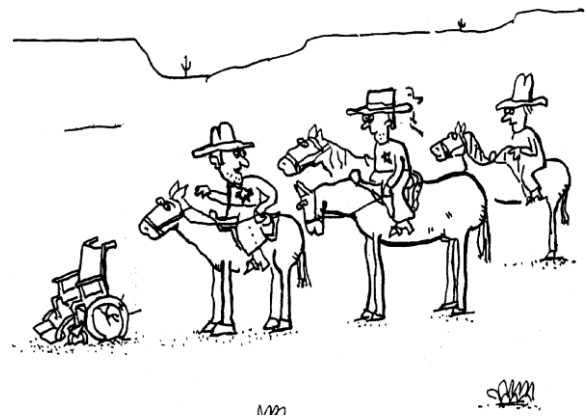
I first meet the recently sober Callahan living in public housing just behind the newly constructed Food Front Co-op. I am editing its newsletter. In short order John is turning out canny cartoons featuring "relentless" cheese and unveiling his takes on our culture, which coupled with his rapier wit, launches a syndicated one-panel comic career and the autobiographical features we publish in *CSQ*. Several books and multiple television series loom on the horizon, but John lives in the here and now, mostly one comic image at a time.

Watching John develop a single cartoon, nearly all produced under looming *Willamette Week* deadlines [en route to international syndication], is a short course in the creative process. John banters around ideas, plumbs anyone nearby or near a phone for suggestions, and then plays with 2 or 3 possibilities, flipping them around—mentally and verbally—until a punch line emerges. He then clutches a sharpie pen in both hands and begins drawing an image to fit the phrase. Sometimes he hits it on the first round, but more often image and phrase duel a while, with both subject to mutation in the process. Then boom, they fit together like a glove, and he’s off the hook for another week.

John is a relentlessly creative and social human being. He marries the two whenever possible. Though he craves the sun, misty Portland is a perfect petri dish for his talents; a foil for his politically incorrect notions. Callahan craves a gut-roiling laugh, quite frequently at his own expense, but just as frequently against the grain of what many considered reasonable. John’s quadriplegia is both a debilitating handicap and a springboard for insight and expression of what others are experiencing, if not daring to utter.

With John no cow is sacred. Whatever pain we feel, we all self censor, crane around for justification, look for a route off the hook. Callahan’s cartoons stick the fork in and probe disquietude, that “not me Lord” feeling of embarrassment, whether it’s being caught unzipped, in over one’s head, or, for the never-been-embarrassed, in full-tilt hypocrisy.

Rather than pinning politicians to the insect display, to avoid terminal boredom and in his wit and wisdom, Callahan sees fit to examine us all. Whether his subject is a head on a skateboard, a portly woman wearing a muumuu, “Fat” writ large across its surface, or the Pope—they’re all busted. The post-alcohol realist message is—no whining, get over it, and on with it. Over and over the phrase resounds—“how does he get away with it?” The sole response: he just keeps turning it out.



Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far On Foot (1989) [namesake image from the book above] raises his high-profile onto another plain. Soon John is bedeviled with long-distance phone calls, most frequently women drawn to his plight, vulnerability, and profound humor. His phone number changes, and changes again. Not long after its appearance, Robin Williams options the work for a major motion picture. For nearly two decades the possibility looms and then slowly, despite high-profile rewrites by the likes of Gus Van Sant, fades away.

The book appears in Dutch—*Man Op Wielen*. Perhaps that edition draws filmmaker Simone de Vries to seek out the subject of her biographical *Touch me someplace I can feel* (2007). The film catches John on both good and bad days, his endless attraction to young women, and his budding career as a singer-songwriter. The camera probes so close to the skin that after the premiere John says in the NW Film Center lobby, “I’m going out for a dermaflage.”



John with his long time friend Joy Campbell—DMM photo © 2007

I'll never forget Callahan's sly smile, which emerges whenever a beautiful woman passes his way; as he nails a joke—in conversation or on the page; after meeting his hero Bob Dylan backstage at a Portland concert; or following his powerful performance of songs from his CD *Purple Winos in the Rain*, with Terry Robb and company, at NW Portland's now dark Music Millenium.

Yet suddenly, on a bright July day, John's no longer with us.

Or he's with us forever, in a differently-abled way.

He gives us his all for 30 years as an active artist, and 60 years on the planet.



Is Callahan still out there, rolling along?

Picture taken during the making of
Touch me someplace I can feel,
courtesy Simone de Vries © 2007

Today, mere hours after his passing, people remark they saw him days ago wheeling down NW 21st, or through the Portland State University halls. Callahan just keeps rolling along.

In my vision, John is now striding out, not perhaps in heaven but far from a dark place, his wheelchair ditched forever.

Written in an emotional rush July 24, 2010 with a hasty post-midnight pre-hyperspace edit

Thanks to K-Man aka Kevin Mullane for inspiration and mutual friendship.

