

## **The Priest and the Motorbike.**

### **Re-Membering Peter Lang - a True Renaissance Man**

**Imelda McCarthy <sup>1</sup>**

My first memory of Peter Lang is standing on a London Street in July 1984 with his wife, Susan Lang and Mia Anderson from Stockholm, who was responsible for bringing both Peter and Martin to Sweden. Before this I had never met either Peter or Susan. As we stood there on our way to hear the Milan Associates, Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo present their work, a motorbike pulled in alongside us. The rider was dressed in black jeans – I rather like to imagine that they could have been leather – a string vest top and black helmet and a long flowing white scarf. It was Peter Lang! I had heard that he had been a priest so I never expected such an apparition.

I never forget this meeting, not least because it led to a great friendship with Peter and Susan, but also because I had such a preconceived notion of Peter as being quite conservative and priest-like. I realised then that it was just a presumption, not anything anyone had ever actually said. I knew he had recently left the Anglican priesthood and was working with a small group of therapists at the City Centre practice in central London. So the image of the biker was at odds with the held presumption.

As I was to come to know in all the years that I knew Peter, he never conformed to presumptions and prejudices and this meeting became a kind of metaphor for me of Peter's creativity and constant ability to surprise and inspire. He was never boxed in but was a true Renaissance man. However, in knowing Peter I always thought that he never really stopped being a priest with a parish even though that 'parish' was called Kensington Consultation Centre and his flock were his colleagues and students. I liked being part of Peter's flock and the image of the 'priest' and the motorbike became a symbol for me of Peter's 'outsider' positioning as it were. He was an African at heart and although part of a colonial heritage he understood the effects of colonisation on nations and peoples. It was this understanding, I feel, that led to his on-going commitment to bring in and make a 'home' for outsiders across the diversities of Gender, Race, Abilities, Class, Culture, educations and so on.

As a result of that brief meeting and conversation on the street in that sweltering summer's day, I was invited to stay with Peter and Susan in their apartment or flat as they called it. For almost a full week I remember wonderful breakfasts where we, sometimes, quite hung-over and with great hilarity underpinned by serious intent, planned the future of a systemic field to our liking. During one of these conversations we talked about the idea of a community and a journal. We had the funny title, EASTIT or the European Association of Systemic Teams in Therapy. The journal remained unnamed for another few years as a small group of us met in London, Dublin and Stockholm to make some plans. Such was the generosity of

---

<sup>1</sup> Fifth Province Centre, Dublin, Ireland, [imeldamccarthy46@gmail.com](mailto:imeldamccarthy46@gmail.com)

Peter and Martin Little that they underwrote the costs of all these meetings. Here, even before the great development of the digital age we imagined an e-journal with contributions in different European Languages. However, as the platforms for such an enterprise were not really in place at that time, Peter and Martin went ahead and both founded and funded the hard copy journal, Human Systems. Later they went on to form a partnership with Leeds University and Peter Stratton as a co-editor. The rest of us with some others became the editorial board more or less until the present time as it now begins to take a new shape.

### **KCC - A Heart-Land and Home in London**

In setting up KCC Peter, Susan, Martin Little and Marjorie Henry provided me with a heartland and home in the UK. I should explain a little why this was so important at the time. As an Irish woman and therapist I was part of a culture, even within our family therapy community, at the time of wanting to forge our own way in the field without drawing on the big powers as it were.

You may well ask why this was. We had resisted bringing in those who later became close friends as we imagined our that our frail sensitivities would be no match in the face of our country's previous colonisers - the British. Even though it was during the 1980's the Irish were still not confident on the international stage. It was a time before Riverdance and the explosion of Irish culture. We in Ireland had always turned our backs 'against' England with outstretched 'arms' to the United States as we felt that we could 'handle' our American colleagues who were still a little in love with Irish accents and use of language! If you doubt that this was just a mere psychological or cultural prejudice I invite you to look at the geographical form that the island of Ireland takes on the map:



Of course over the years, we came to know some great friends across the landscape of British family therapy and systemic practice and as with such relationships prejudices gently dissolved and fell away. Writing now it seems almost incredible that such prejudice was ever there in spite of understanding the legacies of our countries' larger social histories together of coloniser and colonised.

Not only did Peter and KCC make a home for me but they also created spaces for the Milan and Post Milan Teams (Gianfranco and Luigi, Laura Fruggeri and Umberta Telfener, Tom Andersen, Lynn Hoffman and ourselves, the Fifth Province Team), for the pioneers of Social Constructionism, Rom Harre, John Shotter, Ken

and Mary Gergen, Sheila McNamee, Harry Goolishian, Harlene Anderson together with Appreciative Inquiry. John Shotter for some time even became the director of the Doctoral Programme that KCC ran with what is now the University of Bedfordshire.

*How did this home making happen?*

One of our first collaborations with Peter was when he invited my Fifth Province Colleague, Nollaig Byrne and I to present to his students at the Westminster Pastoral Foundation where he had been trained and was now a trainer. As we presented our work we were very aware of Peter at the back of the room. What would his response to our work be, would it resonate with him and would we let him down? During the workshop we saw that Peter shed some tears and he later told us how our words and practices had touched him. I think it was this experience that cemented our on going relationship and collaboration with Peter, as I became a regular presenter at KCC and an extern of both the Diploma and Master's courses that they set up. This opportunity brought me into the heart of the creativity and brilliance of the KCC approach and programmes and I had the privilege of encountering the work of many brilliant students who have gone on to carry the KCC legacy with them. It was a particular delight to be the senior extern examiner in the move to the University of Luton, which was later, renamed the University of Bedfordshire.

*Who was Peter for me?*

Behind Peter, I remember Susan Lang, Martin Little, Marjorie Henry and Elspeth McAdam along with all the dedicated and very devoted staff over the years at KCC. Without them Peter could not have flourished as he did as they held the fort and/or travelled with him at different times.

He was an elegant thinker and it was always such a pleasure to be in conversation with him or to listen to him speak. He was forever out of the box in the most creative and playful of ways. He always had something novel to say which was graceful, expansive and gracious. I often told him he was a philosopher of language himself as much as his beloved Wittgenstein. Of course, with his usual humility he would have none of it. However, for me, he seemed to embody the rigour or Wittgenstein in his 'goings on' together with the playfulness and carnival of Bakhtin. He loved language and played with it to his heart's content and ours.

*Laughter, stories, wine, whiskey and gin*

There are almost too many hilarious stories to tell of gatherings - after workshops, after exam boards, after meetings - when bottles of various intoxicating liquids were opened and the conversations began. They were about managing projects, remembering gatherings and imagining futures. One gathering that we always seemed to return to was the week with Maturana in Oxford in 1985.



Varleria Uggazio, Humberto Maturana, Phil Kearney (under chair) Lynn Hoffman with Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo in the background. KCC Intensive, Oxford 1985.

Here, senior practitioners in our field crawled under chairs in recreating scenarios of lizards finding their prey, imagining synaptic gaps and co-ontological drifts or indeed the strange attractors of Varela after a KCC workshop in London.



Francisco Varela, Buddha and myself. After KCC workshop, London.

Peter whilst never in the middle of such goings on chuckled from the side-lines and signalled his encouragement of all this mirth and fun. Peter and KCC were always on the edge of order and chaos, which in my experience brought out the best of rigour and creativity in him, the students, the staff and the visitors. Our gatherings were always generative and most of all fun. Here below is a sample of the fun and mirth in an open forum conversation at a KCC international gathering in Canterbury in the mid 2000s.



Humberto Maturana, Umberta Telfener, Luigi Boscolo, Imelda McCarthy (in green), Glenda Fredman, Peter Lang, Nollaig Byrne. KCC Canterbury, 2004.

I am very sorry that KCC as an institution is no more. Its flame was bright and strong but like all flames they can be snuffed out by inhospitable environments such as the great financial crash of 2008. I am also sorry that Peter never got to live out his dream of retiring to a sunny seaside home and having on-going conversations by the shore.

I miss you Peter, I miss my home in London but you and KCC will always be in my heart.

*Go Raimh Míle Maith Agat Fear Dílis...*  
*(Thank you beloved man)...*