

Peter McCallum 1943–1999: Psychiatrist, Psychotherapist and Family Therapist

'The best teacher lodges an intent not in the mind but in the heart'

The last day of June, the day of Peter's funeral, was grey. For the previous two weeks the sky had been a crisp blue and the air had had that soft winter warmth that lifts and carries the scent of wattles. Peter knew that his time with his family and friends was coming to an end. So, with good cheer, he had been paying very close attention to the smells and colours around his beautiful limestone house in the Brisbane Ranges outside Geelong. The cancer had weakened him to the point where, regretfully, he couldn't manage a warm engulfing hug, but in the company of his daughter Katherine, son Dougal and his dearest friends, he could watch, smell and sense the changing colours of the sky, the kangaroos grazing, his olive trees and the wattle growing near his dam.

After nearly three weeks in hospital, Peter had come home to die and be buried in the cemetery next to his property. The cancer had been diagnosed in June 1998 and after his initial distress, he began to explore the broad area of mind and body ideas, systematically reading and discussing the various paradigms in great detail. As in the past, the ideas touched him and changed him. He learned to meditate, to eat well, and to open himself to being nurtured by his children, his family and friends. He read positivist research on the healing power of intercessional prayer and the benefits of raspberries to the immune system (so we bought him raspberry tea, and prayed in our myriad ways). He carried his cancer with respect and without sinking into fear.

Particularly in the last year of his life, Peter, a very private man, began speak about his inner world, about the pleasures and disappointments in his working life and most of all, about his most valued relationships. From his period of psychiatric residency at Prince Henry's Hospital in Melbourne onwards, he would read all he could get his hands on, go to conferences, spend hours discussing the ideas with friends. At Prince Henry's Hospital it was child psychiatry and individual dynamic psychotherapy. At the Austin Hospital, it was adult psychiatry. He joined the Victorian Psychotherapy Association, becoming involved on the training committee, presenting papers and immersing himself in the work of Melanie Klein. Next, it was Family Therapy. Twenty years after hearing Salvador Minuchin's presentations and videotapes in 1976, he still talked about how radical and exciting those ideas were. From 1984 until the end of his life he was an assessor for this *Journal*.

Sal Minuchin impressed Peter with his perspicacity and with the practicality of Structural Family Therapy. Peter joined Moshe Lang, Brian Stagoll, Michael Jonas, Bruce Tonge and Aiya Wilson and for a number of years they saw families together, using a one way screen. Together they established the Williams Road Family Therapy Centre in 1979. Peter set up in private practice at Williams Road, taught and supervised, encouraged and inspired. He set high standards for his supervisees, demanding that they *think* about what they were doing and why they were doing it. Peter and Moshe spent some years intensively studying videotapes of interviews, finally writing a series of five articles about the Black Family for this *Journal*. The articles were extended and published as *A Family in Therapy* in 1989—a book unique in the therapy literature because it is the full text of a series of family therapy sessions, accompanied by succinct commentary.

Peter liked one way screens and reflecting teams because they offered the opportunity to learn from families and to see the big picture. Peter considered it essential that therapists

watch therapy being conducted, and review their own work. He believed that it is important to be open about what is done in therapy and that the process of viewing or reading the actual conversation is central to developing as a therapist. He enjoyed theory but recognised, as Bateson said, that 'the map is not the territory'.

Conducting training in family therapy was a significant challenge for Peter, particularly the group process. This challenge and his interest in psychodynamic ideas drew him to books on group analysis and the work of Wilfred Bion, and to participate in a number of Tavistock group experiences in England. He joined the Australian Institute of Social Analysis and began a Deakin University course on Images of Man. The 1980s passed quickly as his children grew through their adolescence. He reduced his practice and took up a position as assistant to the Victorian Chief Psychiatrist. Peter put time and energy into the audit of Mental Health in Victoria. He documented institutional abuse as well as his concerns about the quality of care provided to people with major mental illnesses. The audit strengthened his resolve to improve the mental health services and he left private practice and took up the position of Clinical Director of Psychiatry at Geelong Hospital, commonly known as Dax House. Aware that he had to learn a great deal if he was to make a useful contribution, he undertook a Masters degree in Business Administration and so began the new journey into the paradigms and practical knowledge of accounts, administrators and economists.

As the director of Psychiatric Services at Geelong Hospital, he gave Sophie Holmes his support to establish a two year program of training in family therapy in Geelong. He was determined that the students learn to 'stay with' their patients and not harass them with questions that had no use to them. Peter was attuned, precise and creative in his work. He had the professional wisdom and the courage to recognise where the theory was refuted by living circumstances. He knew about the healing properties of play, humour and gentle teasing: he was patient and gently persistent. He would appear to blunder in with openness, courteously apologising beforehand, expressing concern that the family might be offended, or wondering if perhaps they might be interested in what he had to say. He respected silence and private places so that it eventually felt safe for the family.

Peter was a most talented listener—he listened to his patients and to Schubert, to the orchids and grass trees which grew on his property; in the calm last few days of his life he enjoyed every moment as best he could. One of his final wishes was that we should do likewise.

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