

Williams Road 30th Anniversary Celebration

Onella and I are very pleased to be here tonight, for an evening of celebration and remembering.

I've been thinking back to thirty years ago - I have a diary entry of visiting Moshe and Tess on October 21, 1979, a Sunday I think. Moshe took us over to see Williams Road for the first time. He was very proud of the building he had found (and his victory at the Planning Appeals Tribunal) and we dreamed of all kinds of possibilities, but I don't think we ever imagined it would turn out as it has.

In 1979 Moshe and I had both been working in the public sector for a number of years under the guidance of Geoff Goding, who introduced Family Therapy to Australia, and I think for a long time we never gave much thought to doing anything else. If it hadn't been for certain bureaucratic functionaries (interjection from Ed Harari: "you'll tell us over a cup of Liptons Tea!"), we might still be there, languishing!

I remember discussing with Moshe what the name of the new place should be, or even whether it should have a name. We wanted to say something about family therapy, but we didn't want to sound too grandiose. As Moshe always said "family therapy" captures perfectly well what we are all about, apart from two words i.e. "family" and "therapy". Moshe came across with his first student from Bouverie: Barbara Burge, who has been a role model and inspiration for all of us ever since.

Having been the first independent centre of family therapy we had no models to follow. Moshe wanted to combine free standing independence and tolerance with absence from bureaucratic constraints and hierarchical doctors, so we could have a clinical and teaching practice based on peoples' talents and abilities and needs, not their titles or doctrines. We wanted to have the comradeship and commitment to good therapy and social change we'd experienced in the best days of Bouverie and Melville, without the heavy hand of public service regulations and time serving functionaries that had left many of us, not the least me, burnt out, exhausted and frustrated.

We wanted conversation and interaction, not compulsion or instruction, or idleness. We were tired of all that. So we started something new.

We certainly were not idle, as we tried to combine anarchism with a low level of organisation. Michael Madden used to say that we were a post-modern organisation before our time : always constructing, improvising and deconstructing at the same time. I think we succeeded beautifully, except when we didn't, and it gives one great pleasure to look back on those years of struggle and solidarity, and see our comrades from those days here tonight: Ed Harari, Michael, Jonas, Ian Thomas, Giselle and Sylvia Solinski, Raie Goodwach, Miriam Tisher, Barbie Knothe, Bernie Jenner and Sophie. We forged something that really hadn't happened before in Australia.

I'll always be grateful to Moshe for offering me a place - a home, a refuge where we could rebuild and reconnect with the world. I know many here tonight feel the same. I always liked the idea of Williams Road as a refuge, a safe port of arrival, a community for all of us toiling, huddled masses, yearning to be, if not free, then at least not burnt out : the public health workers, disillusioned academics, and independent scholars and isolated GP's, us riff raff and blow-ins from the war zones wherever they might be.

Moshe says that maybe we should have called Williams Road a "School for Mongrels" (not "for Scoundrels").

Mongrels came from strongly eclectic and often dubious backgrounds, are not of pure pedigree or inbred, and are adaptable, vigorous, loyal and given to a fight if cornered. Be yourself and be proud of it.

This was the myth of Williams Road, our romantic and fast talk in the kitchen about how we were going to change the world. But the reality was lots of hard work by lots of people. We went beyond rhetoric and enacted some ideas that were radical. I think they still are, and I've made a list:

- That everyone has a voice that must be listened to.
- That the more voices you can hear, the more ideas you will have.
- That getting the voices going is the way forward from isolation and immobility to openness and action.

- Always get the interactions going : “give it a stroke and watch it smoke”, and when stuck bring more people into the room: colleagues, family members, outsiders.
- Watch as well as listen, and watch and listen again, until new patterns emerge. That they always do is the great lesson from videotaping.
We watched and listened endlessly and repeatedly. All of us were shaped by the “Black family”.
- Keep the conversation going and the jokes: do not become the carrier of an orthodoxy that can’t laugh at itself. And when start sounding oracular or pompous, shut up. Like now

(Moshe taught me never to miss a good opportunity to be silent ... or start up again!)

So here we go again

I don't know how we did it. We juggled large clinical practices, with teaching, writing, videotaping and caffeinism while planning and plotting summer schools, levels I, II and III courses, Boscolo and other Conferences, including, I think, the first time anyone had spoken publically of clinical aspects of the Holocaust. And of course the Journal. I am pleased to see old copies for everyone tonight. There is much good stuff there. Moshe kept writing books, trying them out on on all of us first . The video was central. It was a massive Sony, ultra expensive, a black and white ¾" that lasted only an hour. Our photocopier was wet, toxic and completely capricious, and we had no faxes, mobile phones or emails (that probably helped!); only Lyn, [who sends her regards from California] with her typewriter and shorthand notepad. I can get tired thinking about how we did it, and of course sometimes we didn't. Apart from our anniversaries in 1989 [which included a conference] and 1999 we never seemed to get good parties going outside of Williams Road : perhaps a symptom of the only serious factional struggle we ever had : the dancers versus the drinkers.

Gradually we grew; by 1989 there were over 25 staff and seven offices coordinated from one small desk in the Waiting Room. These were great days - our dream of a golden community of therapists and scholars linked to teaching and high quality therapy, available to a wide community. Moshe was very fond of pointing to the fig tree in the backyard, which Tess carefully tended and quoting “They shall sit everyone under his vine and under his fig tree”[.Micah 4:4]

WRFTC is an achievement I feel very proud to be associated with. We made a difference, to the culture of psychotherapy in Victoria and Australia.

What has kept us going? Well, we always had our jokes - more like our mantras - and they need repeating. We had our own slogan, after Milan, of "circularity, hypothesising and jocularly". After one Summer School, we took our position as "Who's afraid of Virginia Satir?". Ed once dedicated an article : "To my friends at Melbourne University Department of Politics who taught me to take ideology seriously, and at Williams Road, who taught me seriousness was an ideology". Moshe was always ready to diagnose and treat "seriosity" with his "mongrel therapy", which I regarded as a way of avoiding dogma eating dogma.

The building was a mongrel too – the lights always going out. If we were slow about changing light bulbs upstairs, it wasn't because I went on strike (as the only one who could reach, I got tired of being given the responsibility). It was because we were too busy with light bulb jokes. "How many Bowen Therapists to change a light bulb? : the problem isn't in the light bulb, it's in the fusion box". How many systemic therapists? "Why stop at the light bulb?" : How many psychiatrists? : "None: the light bulb's diagnosis is depression, and just needs SSRI's to power it up again". Clinical psychologists with provider numbers? "One, but it takes six sessions and GP referral note" (that's a new one).

Perhaps I left because we ran out of jokes!

We stepped lightly or tried to, and even danced a bit, in spite of my stern opposition to such excesses. But for me eventually the stairs collapsed, after 800 weeks of pounding up and down them over 50,000 times. I'd always wanted to rock the foundations, but this was taking post structuralism too far.

Williams Road evolved over the years and became more and more established with University connections, accreditation and masters programs. [I worry I would never get in today!] The mongrels and refugees, by dint of talent and hard work became more confident about their places, and moved on. Williams Road now has a diaspora - Alma Road, Malvern Road, Geelong, Barkers Road, Brunswick Street, where the cultures and memories and jokes continue.

Under the guidance of Sophie Holmes, a homegrown product, the place has continued to flourish.

It's wonderful to be here tonight, and join up again in the kitchen talk we've always done so well. I also want to remember our friends at Williams Road who have since died: Geoff Goding, Peter Macallum, David Ingamells, Janet Zeleznikow.....

Williams Road was a home and community for me during the greater part of my professional life, and I'm very grateful for the companionship and commitment and community we've shared.

Thank you Sophie and Kim and Ed and Caitlin for organising tonight.

And heartfelt thanks to Moshe and Tess, for you vision, wisdom and friendship.

Brian Stagoll

10/12/09