

CONFERENCE REPORT

The Dartington Event 6, Devon, England, May 14–17, 1998

The Dartington Event was originally convened in 1992 by Lynn Hoffman, Ros Draper and Margaret Robinson and the Family Institute, Cardiff (a Barnardos project), as an annual opportunity for family therapists to meet in low-key and intimate circumstances to consider the significant issues of the day. Thus readers may have recently seen an excellent editorial by Bebe Speed in *The Journal of Family Therapy* ('Might Psychoanalysis be of Use to Systemic Therapists', 19 (1997): 233–239), with the following acknowledgment: 'Some of these ideas were developed in discussion with colleagues at a conference, Dartington 5, Devon, May, 1997.' Here follows a report on Dartington 6, which took place in a suave country hotel on the edge of the Dartmoor national park, famous for its prison, tors, dangerously bad weather and walking and horseriding on the moors. It is also the setting for 'The Hound of the Baskervilles'.

At Dartington, there are no plenaries, centre-stage speakers or pre-arranged conference themes. Rather, in a truly systemic fashion, the participants constitute the event and all contribute on an equal footing. The conference is nonetheless structured around 90 minute workshops (two concurrent presentations in seven sessions over two and a half days) and daily 'Continuity Groups' for reflection and small group discussion. As well, there is ample free time for physical or social activities, meals and connecting with colleagues. This year, there were 35 participants (many of whom were regulars) mainly from the UK, but also South Africa, Denmark, Israel, the USA and Australia (Carmel Flaskas and myself). Presentations included titles like 'Mirroring in Therapy and Links with Reflecting Teams' (Tony Cartwright), 'Attachment and the Unconscious—Points of Challenge for the Postmodern Frame' (Carmel Flaskas), 'About a Constructivist Point of View' (Lynn Hoffman), 'Teaching Family at the end of the Second Millennium' (James Osborn, Ros Draper and Rudi Dallos), 'The Collective and I' (Bebe Speed), 'Crossing Over—Consultation, Therapy and Training: Chasing the Differences' (Kieran Vivian-Byrne) and my own 'Through a Glass Darkly: Narrative as Destiny' (forthcoming in *Theory and Psychology*).

The Dartington Event is unlike any family therapy conference I have been to: its small size and friendly ambience allows a unique possibility for down to earth

personal and professional sharing concerning the current state of affairs in family therapy. In some ways it is like a retreat, with an open invitation to think widely, creatively and humorously about recent and future developments in the profession, while enjoying being part of a family therapy community and of course, the Devon countryside. As in the old days of Australian family therapy, experiential residentials run by Margaret Topham, Max Cornwell, etc., (I'm talking the 1970s), there is a refreshing emphasis on relationship and bonding with colleagues, rather than the latest therapeutic fad—though that too, gets a look in. Participants come to Dartington to engage with a community of like-minded practitioners: there is little opportunity for status-seeking or promulgating ideologies. The expectation is that participants present not *papers* but *themselves*.

However, Dartington is no family therapy Shangrila. You can't sit next to the likes of Lynn Hoffman and other very experienced figures in the field without being aware of a healthy hierarchy of wisdom, experience and knowledge. It must be said that Dartington is an invitation-only event for 'senior systemic practitioners' and I wondered whether something similar would be possible in Australia. But then if true egalitarianism or mateship does seem to be a peculiarly Aussie quality, this is the British equivalent and it succeeds very well. While former participants can choose to attend each year, prospective participants, who can be at varying stages of a family therapy career, are nominated to the organising committee. In the closing session, this issue of who gets invited to Dartington, and how it is done, was the subject of some discussion. It was agreed that the event probably could be expanded (even doubled in size) to include others from the family therapy fold, while preserving its uniquely intimate context. After witnessing the formation of a new committee to consider the millennial shape of Dartington, I felt optimistic for the Event's future, and found myself reworking George Orwell's aphorism from *Animal Farm*: 'That all persons are equal doesn't exclude the possibility of difference, that some can be more equal than others'.

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