

# Report on Sydney Conference: An Absolute Delight

Here goes ... This was my first foray back to the family therapy field for several years, having got distracted by other duties until I found the necessary space over the past year or so, since moving to New Zealand from Ireland. This was also my first time to Sydney. So I arrived in town wild with the excitement and anticipation of a vegan lion stumbling upon his first zebra since cub-hood. How many paradigm shifts had I missed? What language would they be talking? Did I know anything, in either a not-knowing or a where-has-he-been kind of way?

I last heard Alan Jenkins speak in the mid-1990s. I was seated on a hard bench seat in a barren university classroom in Dublin as he presented at a meeting of the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. The venue for his workshop in Sydney on the eve of the 26th Australian Family Therapy Conference was the relatively palatial Commission for Children and Young People, with comfortable and individual seating (great for those of us with inflated personal space), air-conditioning, walls hung with children's art, and doors bearing quotes from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Alan brought enormous experience and wisdom to his workshop on respectful intervention with disadvantaged young people who have enacted violence or abuse, but what struck me most was the ease with which he accepts the humanity of his clients despite their often 'inhuman' actions. Many of us may be tempted to adopt positions of social control but Alan argues that people stop violence out of their own ethical realisations.

The conference proper began the following day, at Rydges North Sydney. There was quite a buzz, of expectation and anticipation, of old mates meeting for the first time in ages, of being in Sydney for the first time. All our name badges emphasised our first names and first-timers' also had a 'sun' to beg pity on our behalves; presumably cybernetically (still in vogue), this reflected and contributed to a genuinely friendly and welcoming atmosphere which thrived throughout the conference and is without doubt a tribute to the efforts of Lyndal Power and her tireless and ever-present gang. The refreshments and lunches were great. And what conference could feel comfortable with its identity without a few technical hitches with videos, PowerPoints, air-conditioning and the like? So, Maslow would have been well pleased with the provision of basic needs, as I was.

Each morning began with a keynote presentation. First up were Charlotte Burck and Gwyn Daniel from the Tavistock Clinic in London, speaking of their work with children and families in the context of violence or parental mental illness. I was fortunate to attend their all-day workshop on the same subject the day after the conference ended. These women were a real treat, with that ease and confidence that reflected their extensive knowledge and experience, but without a trace of arrogance. They reminded us of some of the factors promoting resilience in children and spoke of the importance of 'witnessing the witnessing', making space in therapy for children's narratives and striving to help children move from disempowered to empowered witnessing. With regard to parental mental illness, children often adopt caretaking roles and we were urged to validate what they are trying to do, ever mindful of potentially conflicting cultural and societal norms.

The keynote speech on the second day was a presentation by Laurie McKinnon on emotional and psychological abuse in the home. She concentrated on abuse perpetrated by men and reminded us of the long-term effects on the recipients. Also presented was a somewhat one-dimensional dramatisation on video of a stereotypical man emotionally abusing his female partner; useful, I would imagine, for educating and helping women and men in these positions, but lacking sophistication for this audience, in my view. The third keynote speech was from Alan Jenkins on the ethics of restorative practice, presenting further challenge to our more comfortable and familiar positions on abuse and those who perpetrate it.

Apart from these speeches, there was a total of 59 different presentations spread over the three days. How to pick the winners from such a field? As it turned out, there were plenty of excellent sessions and only a few disappointments. Among my favourites was Joel Cullin, who bravely attempted to clear up some of our epistemological confusion, with an emphasis on Bateson (the hero) and a wonderfully provocative comparison of Bateson with Maturana. Joel was cited as one to watch by last year's reviewer, which, combined with Joel's excellent recent paper in the journal, made the disappointingly small audience feel like we had got privileged entry to the speak-easy. Malcolm Robinson gave us a very moving account of his work with 10 intellectually disabled men who had been victims of

abuse by a paedophile ring, relating the challenges of the therapeutic work and of interfacing with complicit systems. Claire Miran-Kahn talked through her experiences of stepping over the line from therapist to agent of social control, in a very practitioner-oriented and pragmatic approach which would have resonated with most of us. Annemaree Bickerton, Agnes Benstock and Julie Ward spoke of the Intensive Care and Assessment Team which provides acute response to distressed young people presenting to a Sydney mental health service. This impressive initiative privileges safety and systemic approaches and was clearly of great interest to many of us in the audience, who repeatedly interrupted the flow of the presenters with our need to know more.

The Conference dinner was a thoroughly postmodern experience, with 'not-knowing' a recurring theme. None of the conference organisers (and, therefore, none of the delegates) were informed that the restaurant had changed hands and name a few days before, prompting endless curiosity in our search for the venue. The ethnicity had also been changed, from Australian/European to Indian, but the advance orders of steak and the like were honoured, as we were informed when we arrived. Indian food menus were then distributed, adding gloriously to the confusion. For a time no-one was prepared to adopt an expert stance, until the manager finally threw herself into the void, permitting Indian food to be ordered as well. After the meal many of us pulled our chairs onto the grass outside to gaze at the

Harbour Bridge and beyond. The bridge was surrounded by hundreds of flying animals, the nature of which we debated, the dearth of zoologists finely balanced by the excess of alcohol. At the end of the night a few die-hards sat by the harbour, conscientiously finishing the last of the drink, your reviewer only there out of a sense of journalistic integrity, you will appreciate.

The final afternoon witnessed the official first breath of the Australian Association for Family Therapy. This has put it up to those of us across the ditch to get our house in order. The *ANZJFT* Award for Distinguished Service to Family Therapy went to Carmel Flaskas. We heard the reflection panel make some final comments and heard briefly about the conference next year in Melbourne.

The conference was an absolute delight to me, a precious chance to catch up with current thinking which, to my relief, seems to be teetering between postmodernism and some of the ideas and models predating it. It was great to meet like-minded people in such a warm and welcoming environment. I believe the best measure of success of any conference is not the revelations of the speakers but the energy and enthusiasm with which we infect each other. As Bateson never said, it's the conference which connects.

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