

Tributes to Margaret Topham



Jim Crawley: My first encounter with Margaret was at a week-long intensive workshop in 1975, not long after arriving here from the UK. The experience was profound. At a personal level, family of origin issues stirred up, but not resolved in personal therapy in the UK, came into focus. Professionally, a whole new world of experiential teaching opened up. Subsequently, teaching in workshops with Margaret, I discovered the wonderful generosity with which she shared her experience, as well as appreciating from a different perspective her extraordinary insight and her capacity to set and maintain the clear boundaries that made exploration and risk-taking safe.

There were other experiences, too — such as travelling from Melbourne to Sydney on about six occasions in the early 1980s as I tried to help Margaret write a book. Each day would involve wonderful conversation and end with a bottle of dry white, but with nothing written! Despite Margaret's ability to express ideas so clearly and to be both original and critical in her discussion of theory, her brilliance was as an artist and as a practical teacher of her art, not as an academic.

Later, after her retirement, there was Margaret as a close personal friend — one who, as Max Cornwell has indicated in his obituary in this journal and in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (14/5/04), struggled increasingly with poor health and depression, and who I think missed more than she let on, the involvement in family therapy that she had so loved. But always the performer! I last saw her in February this year during a brief visit to Sydney: she was unwell and the afternoon involved an unscheduled visit to the hospital outpatient department, but in the evening she rallied for dinner at a favourite restaurant with a bottle (or two!) of good red.

Thanks, Margaret, for so much.

Ann Stark: Margaret Topham's impact on Family Therapy in Tasmania was both seminal and profound. She came here twice, in 1977 and 1978, to run her training workshops and imbue with the spirit of inclusiveness and linkage she had found in working systemically with families an isolated and disconnected group of therapists — a group who rapidly became bound together and part of the Australian community of Family Therapists, thanks to Margaret's robust approach to her training groups and the people within them.

The mystique which already surrounded the reputation of her training workshops was inadequate preparation for the impact of Margaret herself and the power with which she shared the ideas and techniques of this (in the truest sense of the word) radical way of working with people.

Over the years, Margaret adopted a number of strategies to control what she described as her inherent tendency to interrupt. At the time of her visits to Tasmania, it was needlework. She would sit in the back of a group, listening intently,

the speed with which the needle rhythmically entered and exited the canvas dependent on the intensity of the action in the role-play and the strength of her desire to intervene. Then the deep gravelly voice would speak and we would be struck by the level of insight and wisdom she revealed. Sometimes we despaired of ever reaching her facility and comfort in working with so many at once, or even attaining her crowd-control skills as she worked with large groups with ease. However, she was uniformly encouraging to her mixed group of 25 earnest young and middle-aged trainees.

The legacy Margaret has left to Family Therapists in Tasmania is one of humanity, humour and connectedness. She is remembered with pleasure and appreciation.

Mike Locke: One of my great regrets is that I never did one of Margaret Topham's Family of Origin workshops that she ran in the mid-1970s. Everyone else did, and told me how wonderful they were. But I never did, and now I wonder why. Too busy pursuing my interest in strategic therapy and disavowing FOO work. Or more likely, telling myself 'I'll get around to it', and I never did. But I do remember my sense of Margaret, confident, bold colour, red lipstick and nails, worldly — so 'Sydney'. At a time when other women were in cheesecloth, she was in red. A woman consciously confident and at ease with her own family therapy persona. Reminds me of my mother. She was so 'Sydney'. Perhaps that's the reason — too close to home. Wise decision, I think. But I spent time with Margaret in Adelaide, at the national conference 'Children of Parents in Conflict', in the International Year of the Child, 1979. I was there because Lynn Hoffman was a keynote speaker and was presenting workshops on the new, interesting work of a group of therapists in Milan.

Lynn Hoffman (I think of her as 'Ginger Meggs') talked about the therapy of the 'small and vulnerable' in a harsh and psychoanalytic town, New York. As I remember it, Lynn was distressed; she had flown out under the impression that it was a family therapy conference. She rewrote her paper to fit in with the audience, and Margaret Topham was there, a nurturing, maternal figure, to help with the revision. That paper appeared in the very first issue of our Journal, launched in 1979. All the family therapy push was there, Moshe Lang, Bruce Tonge, Michael White, Graham Prior, Graham Martin, Brian Stagoll, and Margaret Topham (and I was there too!). And I was sitting with Margaret and Lynn during one lunch, discussing Bateson and dolphins and family therapy. I felt accepted, as a younger family therapist. The warmth of this memory has stayed with me ever since. ©