

Letters

I first met Liesl when she was a participant on the South West London College counselling skills course. She was angry because she was not considered qualified enough to become an art therapist. She also disliked the authoritative manner in which she considered psychodynamic art therapists interpreted their clients' artwork. It was on the course that she met Pat Milner and others and, after her three-year training with us, started developing Person-Centred Art Therapy. The rest is history.

What I came to know about her was that, age 12, she waved goodbye to her father at the station and boarded the Kinder-transport to Britain. It was the last she saw of any of her family, except her mother. I gather her teenage years as a refugee were not easy. The following quotation I found on the web, quoted on Holocaust Memorial Day 2005.

'Eventually I heard that my mother had survived. They found her in the mortuary at Mauthausen Camp. She must have made a little sound when the camp was liberated - so back she came from the dead. She was extremely ill. At first she went to Prague (the Fischmann family's original home). She had typhus. No one else had survived of all the people I grew up with.

'When she was well enough she came here. We met again. I last saw her when I was 12 and now I was 18. There was an enormous gap. One of the first things she said to me was that I was the one person left to her to make life all right again. I couldn't do it. It was no longer a mother-and-daughter relationship. I couldn't upset her. How do you proceed with a mother who has been to Auschwitz? In retrospect, I realise that after the war I got a different mother back.

'It was all too confusing and awful. The things we needed to say we were not ready to say to each other. She died before it could happen. She never cried after the war. She carried on coping, like I did. So we were both denying things; two different people, with the war limbo in between. We survived as best we could.'

I was privileged to watch the most amazing film with Liesl. Her father had been a wealthy industrialist and they lived a privileged life in Prague before the war. Liesl returned to Prague, once for a person-centred conference and again with her two sons. To her amazement, neighbours had kept the family films and returned them to her. (Her father must have owned a very early personal cine camera.) She needed support to watch the film for the first time, and Robin Shohet and I were gratified to provide it. We watched family picnics, car trips, the young Liesl diving into their swimming pool and, most affecting of all, her brother's Bar Mitzvah with all the friends and relatives.

She was an active member of BACP in the earlier days, and also of SCATS (the Standing Conference for the Advancement of Counselling Training and Supervision). Her workshops were always in demand - enjoyable and invariably fruitful. She (and others of us) were saddened when increasing 'professional' pressures meant that BACP conferences began (in Transactional Analysis terms) to be increasingly adult and parental. Liesl always carried a banner for Free Child as a vital strand - indeed the core - of learning and of truly therapeutic work. Spiritually committed, she was not religious in the narrow sense of the word. Her Free Child and her quite caustic wit are what I most enjoyed, remember - and will miss.

Brigid Proctor *On behalf of all of us who worked and played with Liesl in the early days of counselling*

Liesl Silverstone's achievements in the last three decades of her life are awe-inspiring. They have been recognised by the most respected practitioners in the therapeutic profession, not only in Britain but across the world.

From the USA, Carl Rogers endorsed her course and saw her as 'ploughing new ground'. She was invited to talk in Canada and Hong Kong. Her books, published by Jessica Kingsley, have been bestsellers, translated into other languages - even Korean - and favourably reviewed in the most established art therapy journals. She became a Fellow of BACP.

This all arose from her own genius discovery: that 'the precious gift' of being 'heard empathically... deeply understood' by another person, though powerful, is limited if it is developed only in the context of the spoken word. There is also 'the power, the potential, the truth contained in art images made visible': images spontaneously produced . from our unconscious selves and shared with an empathic listener. The resulting

integration for an individual of their own visual image with their own freely spoken explanation is healing, real and life-transforming. That is what Liesl discovered and from discovery she created Person-Centred Art Therapy.

Already a trained social worker, counsellor and art therapist, with recent experience of tutoring on counselling courses at South West London College, Liesl founded the Person-Centred Art Therapy Centre. She trained some hundreds of us on the P-CAT Skills . certificate, post-certificate and diploma courses. Some of us she trained to teach her courses elsewhere: Crawley, East London, Tottenham, Colchester, Nottingham... and to offer workshops on other counselling courses throughout the UK. She maintained standards through the Person-Centred Art Therapy Association, offering refresher workshops until only a year ago. She was tireless, insistently rigorous, always pointing out where we could improve because she held responsibility for our use of P-CAT skills in our many varied spheres work.

In 1997 Brian Thorne, Professor of Counselling at the University of East Anglia, wrote in the foreword to the revised edition of Liesl's book: 'All those concerned with the cultivation of the human spirit and the releasing of creative energy will be sustained and strengthened by the inspirational example of a teacher and therapist who, as a child, knew the full horror of Europe's darkest hour this century but was not overcome.'

Jane McIntosh

Obituary

Liesl Silverstone

Liesl Silverstone died on the 15 December, after one and a half years of increasing illness. She was 86. She was playing tennis weekly at 83 and walking vigorously at 85. She was actively engaged in the community in Golders Green where she lived most of her adult life.

At her funeral, in the packed crematorium chapel, Pat Havell, one of the practitioners she had trained in Person-Centred Art Therapy, read the professional tribute written by Jane McIntosh (published below). One of Liesl's two sons commented that he imagined that most people in the congregation knew nothing of those achievements and there was a strong murmur of assent. Her sons knew her as an accomplished and prolific artist, a great linguist, an excellent cook, a great walker, a loving mother and a worthy daughter. And therein lies her tale.

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