



Tribute

A tribute to Mary Priestley

4 March 1925 – 11 June 2017

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I would like to pay tribute to Mary by sharing her human side, as I knew her. We met only once, but we developed a close friendship through the many letters we exchanged over a seven-year period.

Mary was warm and compassionate. I was always comfortable confiding in her about both personal and professional things, and her responses were always wise and supportive. She would either share an insight that would help me, or she would advise me on how to protect myself from harmful feelings. The most touching response was when my father died, and I told her that all of my nuclear family were gone. She quickly responded by offering to be my cousin. She said she couldn't be my sister because we lived too far away.

Mary was humble. It seemed she never realised how great her contribution to music therapy was. Perhaps this was because she did not receive the recognition she deserved, which I could never understand. She always seemed surprised by any compliment. She was so surprised and excited when I invited her to publish the Herdecke Lectures that she implored me: "Don't change your mind!"

Mary hated computers. The Herdecke Lectures were originally typed on paper. Thus, to prepare them for the book she had to enter the text into computer files. She complained a lot about that, and when she finished the book, she proudly proclaimed that she had conquered the dragon.

A theme throughout her letters, especially in the later years, was her desire to be more active. She often felt alone and bored doing nothing. She wanted to continue working with clients, playing in ensembles, giving lectures, teaching, and any other professional activity related to music or music therapy.

As Mary confronted the inactivity of retirement, she became very fascinated with being in a "void". Mary sent me a paper she presented in 1991 entitled, *Trusting the Fertility of the Void*. I don't believe it was published anywhere. In it she explored how emptiness is experienced in daily life, creativity, healing, and disappointment, and how these times provide opportunity for new and more fulfilling ways of being. Most important is an awareness of the possibilities provided by what might already be in the void without awareness, as well as what is not there.

Mary dealt with the voids in her everyday life as a retiree through creative activities. She loved to paint when her days felt empty. I do not know if she saved any of her paintings, but I would relish having one as a remembrance of her. Mary also took pleasure in writing limericks. In 2001, she sent me a complete book of them with her own illustrations of each. Here are two that show her great sense of humour.

A vague man who lived near to a river
Struck a close bond with his liver
He never went yellow
That quaint, quirky fellow
And thoughts about gin made him quiver!

A sensitive young girl called Lily
Was an honest and brave little filly
She said "I won't vex
My partner with sex"
But he thought she was just rather silly.

Mary's orientation to therapy was much broader than Freudian thinking. She was very interested in Jung, body work, and various Eastern philosophies.

Probably more than is realised, Mary thought in terms of how soma, psyche, and spirit were integrated. She practised and taught the Chi-Kung six swimming dragon exercises. These exercises were concerned with combining “Taoist breathing practices with the circulation of ‘Chi’ (the vital force) along the acupuncture meridians” (Priestley, n.d.).

Mary spoke freely about her own physical states and conditions and how they were connected to higher layers of consciousness. In her article on the void, she described an exercise she did from ancient 5th veda. After eating, she sat still for five minutes and then walked around to facilitate digestion:

As I sat I could hear my abdomen beginning to make happy and active noises, and then, surprisingly, I felt my digestion as a part of the great activity of nature — inside me and outside, and realised forcibly that it was something that I did not consciously have to do but just humbly and respectfully allow to happen (Priestley 1991: 5).

She was always gracious with those who were interested in her work. She was not concerned about how accurately others understood or interpreted her work, and she did not impose her ideas and techniques on her students. She was also not concerned with ownership of her ideas or whether her work had been cited by others.

As evidence of her openness and generosity, Mary donated all her clinical materials to Temple University to establish an archive of Analytical Music Therapy in its library. Completed in 2002, the archive contains all her personal/clinical diaries from 1971 through 1990, 82 cassette and 27 reel-to-reel tapes of her improvisations with clients, and all her known published writings. The archive provides clinical data on her work with 104 clients. Before sending these materials, Mary carefully went through each material and removed all identifying data of her clients.

Mary made an indelible mark on my life, not because she was such an important pioneer in music therapy, but because of the kind, loving and creative woman she was. Mary demonstrated these personal qualities to me in her letters, but all one need do is to listen to her improvise with her clients. Her music is immediately responsive, understanding, and supportive, with splashes of boldness and her indomitable personality. We have lost a beautiful human being, and fortunately for us, she devoted her being to music and music therapy.

Here is the last part of a poem that one of her

clients wrote at the end of their work together. It appears in *Essays on Analytical Music Therapy* (pp. 317-318). It describes Mary much better than I have.

BIRTHDAY GIFT

...

You came into my life —
Unwanted.
You made me feel pain —
Unforeseen.
You taught me that people
Are human — and precious.

You continue to affirm me
As a loving — and lovable person.

You have opened my eyes
To the joy of sharing —
And the pain and sorrows
Of loneliness
You have created for me
Beautiful silences,
Downy-lined, like a bird's nest.

You have supported me
In hours of darkness,
Strengthened me
In moments of weakness,
Encouraged me to live
When I wanted to die,
Tended my wounds
And lanced my boils.
Shown no revulsion
At my shameful deeds.

You have accepted me
As I am,
Tried always to understand
And given me courage
On this dark voyage
Of self-discovery.

Now, as the time nears
For us to part,
When I may never
See you again,
In my innermost heart,
My secret, inviolable sanctuary,
Seated at ease there,
I find you.

REFERENCES

- Priestley, M. (1991). *Trusting the fertility of the void*. Paper presented at meeting of the Sufi Healing Order. London: Author.
- Priestley, M. (n.d.). *The Six Swimming Dragon Chi-kung Exercises: A gentle way to healthier living* (Unpublished paper). London: Author

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