

Mini-autobiography

- As said, not a bulging autobiography or exhaustive archive. Just some notes that may be useful.

So. The social-ideological context, relevant to one of my main motives for doing this website. And the personal context.

First, my story.

When I was 12 I decided to become a doctor. There were no doctors in my family. Both my parents were classical pianists, with general intellectual-artistic backgrounds, and quite broad interests. At that age I had an illness for a short while, infectious hepatitis. I was looked after in the school san by a nurse, Marjorie Mounter by name, she regaled me with stories about illnesses and healing, and all that inspired my decision. Through my education I never wavered, did the basic sciences at school, gained a degree in physiology and the Oxford medical degree, did my clinical studies at The London Hospital in Whitechapel (not 'Royal' in those days). I was house-doctor at The London to a neurosurgeon and at the Whittington to a general physician.

However, during the time of my clinical studies, my father died, he was only 52, from cancer (of the pancreas). I think it was this that took the wind out of my medical sail. I specialised in psychiatry and got the specialist qualification. In retrospect, I think this may have been a first step out.

While still a doctor I married and, while I was working as a psychiatrist at Fulbourn, near Cambridge, we had our first two dear children, Jason and Jessica. I inherited a bit of money and decided I wanted to decamp to Wales, where we lived for about 18 months in a beautiful old house on a hillside. The area only got electricity while we were there - living without electricity is a really good way of connecting with ones relation to night and day, to nature, to 'civilisation'. (I've written a poem, last year, about the advent of electricity there, see 'Electric' in Poems under 'Recent Poems').

I had an unclear aim to write, wasn't sure what, though I did have in mind the idea of writing a biography of my German-Jewish grandfather, Max Osborn. He was one of that interesting social group in Germany at the time, the 'assimilated' Jews. He'd gained an Iron Cross for service in World War I and he was a well-known and highly regarded art-historian and theatre critic. However, when offered a professorship at Leipzig University, the condition was attached that he convert to Christianity. He refused. But: he decided that in order for his son (my father) not to be faced with such a situation, he would be baptised, and not circumcised. This was not uncommon among the assimilated Jews. It didn't of course protect them in the slightest from the Nazi onslaught.

What I did write was a play about a concentration camp official who had hidden his past. I sent it to the Royal Court. They didn't do it (though it was received with huge enthusiasm by an assistant there, a Hungarian called Jenno Vincze) but they said if you come back to London, come and join the writers group. We did go back to London.

The writers group at the time was run by Keith Johnstone, doing extremely interesting work with improvisation and with masks. My participation led to a close and for me extremely fruitful time with the Royal Court Studio, indeed with the Royal Court Theatre altogether - I was Literary Manager for a time, I edited the programme and was in charge of the script department (have to say I wasn't much use at spotting new talent!).

I was very involved with Keith's improvisation work and especially stimulated by his work with masks (I describe it in detail in various contexts in two articles: 'Possession: The Mask - a way of looking at events in a social organism' in the section History and Design of Courses; and 'Ethics Of Acting' in the section Destination). He has written what I think remains far and away the best book on improvisation, called Impro (first published 1979).

I worked for some years in the theatre as reader, director, translator and occasional actor (and occasional writer, but I put this in brackets, I did have some small successes but nothing substantial).

A year's grant from ABC television sent me as 'trainee director' to the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry. There I met two students at the Art School, doing events they called 'Dance', based on the work of the Abstract Expressionists in New York. We worked together and this had a powerful effect on me. (For this whole period, see 'Royal Court and Coventry' in Gallery.)

I also ran a variety of groups myself, for actors and non-actors, with students and in 'adult education'. I was asked by Tony Collinge to do a day at Goldsmith's College for the Art Teacher's Certificate students - this through Anton Ehrenzweig's interest in improvisation for artists. I did a mask day with them, then another day as a 'happening', with minimal instructions, which they loved. It led to my working there two days a week and we set up a performing group - some of these students plus a sociology student and one or two actors I brought in. We called the group Further Granulated Advice. We alternated exercises run by me with events. Some of these events were done in public open spaces, or in performance venues (such as the Drury Lane Arts Lab). They were based on a 'notation', which would have been written by any one of us. (This work is described in some of the articles - 'Possession' again, 'Happenings' in Performance Group, and 'FGA' in Gallery).

I was asked by John Southgate to run an improvisation session with the staff of a group he headed at the Polytechnic of North London (as it was then): the Organisation Unit of the Management Studies department. This connection led to my getting a job as a lecturer at the Poly. I can't remember how the connection with John Southgate happened, but like that with Tony Collinge, it turned out extremely fruitful. (Certainly for me, and I like to think for all the people involved - I occasionally meet someone from these situations and they tell me how greatly they were influenced by this work, which is gratifying of course).

John and I formed a powerful alliance. We succeeded in setting up a course for mature students who wanted to learn about groups and organisations but: there were two special parts of this. They were what made the course memorable and, in my view - not only mine I believe - of continuing importance.

Firstly, the students individually determined to a great extent their own learning programme. This was not totally new, but we made sure that it went as far as it could within the resources available - which included the experience that other students on the course might be able to offer as a resource.

But secondly, and this was I think unique at the time (and probably remains so - indeed is probably more so now), the course as a whole, students and staff together, decided jointly on how to use resources, including time and space, and outside consultants.

And there was a third aspect: it was a large group of students, sixty to eighty. This was very important. It meant that that the course simulated an organisation.

The conventional 'training' group would be much smaller, say 7 to 15, so simulating a team, or a social grouping or family. The exception was the Tavistock large groups: my view of these was that they were run dictatorially. They certainly did not develop a structure, nor a consciousness, of co-operative organisation and collective decision-making.

Subsequently I did similar work on the Counselling Skills courses at South-West London College, set up and run by Brigid Proctor. Here, that extended to the development of a detailed structure also for peer-assessment.

In our world today it is vital to assert that commercial competition and market forces are not the only way of evaluating worth or quality. But other ways of evaluating need to be developed and we need practice in them. We simply do not have the structures nor do we have the life-learning experiences for doing this, in any remotely widespread sense. Nor do we have an articulated desire for them, or recognition that they are needed.

The work at the Poly and at S-W London College is described in several of the articles - 'Planning A Self-Directed Learning Programme', 'Peer Assessment', 'The British Experience', and 'Emergence'. It is worth mentioning that both these courses achieved diploma status.

Meanwhile, of course my own life continued. This is not a personal autobiography, but just to say that we had a third child, our dear daughter Kate. And my marriage, well, we split up. I developed in other directions, I had other relationships, I went on some journeys.

I lost direction for a time (I even lived in a van for a year or so!). The advent of Thatcher made the co-operative way of working unsustainable. I lost energy for it. But in my personal story I want to say that one of the things I am proud of in my life is that my former wife and I have never quarrelled over the children, in our divorce we obtained joint custody and we have always co-operated where they are concerned and we remain friends.

I continued to do some work with organisations and organisation-learning workshops (also in Denmark and in Germany and on one international workshop in France - described in 'A 5-Language Laboratory' - fun to read, I think, this one!); and I did some theatre work.

Then I started working in film. I made two short films, which are on this website. And I did three theatre shows, two of them out of circus material, as I had been learning trapeze at the Circus Space. Making this visual material accessible was also one of the purposes of constructing this website.

I amade my home for a couple of years in a communal household in a communal street, a squatted street, and lived in the 'alternative' culture both here and abroad. An account of this time is in: 'St Agnes Place', in 'Performance Group, Travels and Growth Movement'. And a bit in 'Who I Am Responsible For' in 'History and Design of Courses'.

And now I have become old - which some of the poems are about. Sometimes I laugh out loud, sometimes I shout with anger - but of course, it can't be changed. What I dislike most is the diminution in energy. I still have much to do. I am currently clearing the decks of old stuff. Tedious and tiring, (emotionally as well as physically) but it seems essential for doing new work. And, I don't want to leave a mess behind. Although a wise cleaning lady I once had, Mrs Cassini, largely retired now, said to me: " - a bit of a mess is a part of us"!

Well, as to the new work. I hope soon to be re-re-(re)-writing a filmscript - a feature. And: I do believe that the structures of collective decision-making and co-operative organisation that we were working on in the educational setting are relevant, indeed essential, in our social predicament today. Making the articles I wrote about this work accessible was certainly one main purpose for this website. We seem to have no articulated structures in that chasm between free market and state control, between competition and collaboration.

There is work to do here. There is the Co-operative Movement; and the Greens, with their emphasis on local economies - though as I shall say in 'Destination', I do not think they have yet articulated this enough publicly. I shall say more about these issues in 'Polarities' and other articles in 'Destination'. There is work to do on Tough Humanism - not confrontationally tough, rather articulately so. I have a half-written article with this title for the section 'Destination' also.

One motive for putting this mini-autobiography together is to briefly outline the areas in which I believe I have some relevant skills and knowledge. Thus: a basic education in science, a first degree in physiology, a degree in medicine

and a diploma in the psychiatric specialty; I have experience of theatre and film, both behind the stage and screen and on them; I have worked with the dynamics of groups and organisations, and in education with mature students in these areas. Then there is classical music, which I heard music from my time I in the womb. I never wanted to be a professional musician, but I play the piano and have performed several times - as I do in the show 'What Do I Wear When I Play Chopin?'

I hope these kinds of special knowledge prove useful in how I present the material in the articles I am putting forward in this website. And in general, I believe it is useful to the construction of any developed outlook on our problems: to consider what knowledge each of us has, what we can access, what is needed. Something of this issue is explored in the article 'Edges Of Philosophy'. And it is often practised by that excellent organisation, the Forum for European Philosophy. < www.philosophy-forum.org >.

This website is not finished!