

Helen Jones - a personal memory

by
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It was the first session of a course on Personal Construct Psychology, a warm summer evening in Bloomsbury. About thirty people had arrived, most of them coming straight from work and carrying their busy working atmosphere into the hall, getting coffee, sorting out their pens, finding notebooks. And at 7 o'clock, we began.

"I'm Helen Jones", said the teacher at the front of the hall. "I would like to invite you to construe me".

I still remember many of the non-verbal responses. Some people started to write things in their notebooks. Some looked intently at Helen, as if clues might emerge from close observation. Some sat looking perhaps bemused, perhaps anxious. One or two sat with arms tightly folded, looking annoyed by this unexpected and vague introduction. A couple flipped through their notebooks or bags as if fully occupied with other things, perhaps waiting for this new teacher to do something more teacherly, something more worthy of their attention.

And then the verbal responses began.

"Well, you're very confident", said the first, "and you like to do things differently".

"You seem quite fashion-conscious," offered another, "and I think you prefer natural colours".

A long pause.

"We can't really respond", came a loud authoritative voice. "We don't know you at all, it would just be our assumptions and projections so there's no point. All I can say that you appear to be a woman, and you're the group leader here, but it would be ridiculous to say more".

"I can say more", came a quieter, warmer voice. "I think you probably live in a lovely house with polished wood tables and vases of flowers and art on the walls and lovely textiles, and I think you drive a small car, probably a French one".

I don't remember much more of the first evening, just those few minutes after Helen's invitation. My own reaction was intense interest, and perhaps because my specialism at the time was group relations I was far more interested in the participants than the course content at that point. I have thought of this

introduction many times since, and I spoke about it with Helen some years later as she became a mentor, and a colleague, and a friend.

Invited by the Rivista editors to contribute a memory of Helen to accompany the republication of one of her papers in this edition, it was the first thing that came to my mind. I see it now as a perfect illustration of Helen's great gift for conjuring PCP - not just teaching PCP, but creating space for the living experience of it. She left us free to explore what to make of it, and to find our own meaning in what we and others were doing in our communications and relationships. Helen would listen closely and accept all contributions with interest. She was curious about variations, encouraging us to anticipate and explore more imaginatively. She tended to avoid explanations. Her answers were often more interesting questions.

At the end of that ten weeks course my understanding of PCP theory was still very shaky, but I had already contacted the PCP Centre in London and spoken to Fay Fransella and Ray Evans about further training. I knew others had done the same.

During our university programme we had sat through many classes on many different approaches. We had heard a lot about the great men behind the major theories, had been given many formal definitions and instructions, and theories presented as facts.

Our personalities had been measured, and analysed, and defined, often in terms of weaknesses, defences, and deviations from norms. At the end of Helen's classes, while we were still limited in our understanding of PCP in theoretical terms, we were excited by it. We were aware of having been fully awake, intensely curious, unconditionally accepted and respected, and generally fascinated by it all. We had spent ten evenings exploring what some of Kelly's ideas might mean to us, and for us. We had started to think and act "as if", and we had discovered many unexpected and useful things about ourselves and each other. We had started to hold ideas and insights, not as facts or truths, but as propositions, understanding that however functional or valuable they seemed, alternatives were still possible and new insights might yet emerge. This new teacher had made a point of "not knowing" and had instead offered us many things to try on for size. And we had remembered that this was why we had elected to study psychology in the first place, and that we had just had our first experience of what we had been looking for.

My last experience of working with Helen, just few years ago, was designing and developing a new Diploma in PCP which would be taught online using a Moodle platform and video conferencing. I would be the first-year course tutor and Helen would be the practice supervisor.

I think it's accurate to say that we were an unlikely pair for this challenge, given that we had been reluctant late adopters of all tech innovations for decades - the last to get mobile phones in the 80's, the last to have email in the 90's, the last to join social media. To say that it was a steep learning curve was an understatement. The process of developing the programme included many things previously unknown to us, the kinds of things that gave both of us sleepless nights. But approaching it together it became a Kellyan adventure on a grand scale - an opportunity to re-imagine how education might work differently, to learn how our anxiety and fears could be worked with creatively, and to re-construe ourselves as constructivist teachers online.

There were many moments of disaster and comedy. Helen's first attempt to input material re-formatted part of the programme and accidentally deleted the rest, and when I tried to correct it, I had somehow lost all the passwords and locked myself out of my own system. We "froze" together on Skype every week. On one memorable occasion when I rang her to get help with something I couldn't figure out, she answered from the floor underneath her desk where she was trying to find her own password on the wi-fi router.

In spite of this comedy behind the scenes, it was all running smoothly by the time the students arrived for the opening meeting, and it now seems to me the perfect example of working with Helen. Everything was interesting. A setback would always be construed initially as a problem, but other constructions were

available. Difficulties were a chance to figure out new ways of working. Not knowing was an opportunity to make new sense of new things, to make different things happen, and to make a difference.

So, there they are: my first and last memories of working with Helen, beginning as a student on a short course discovering PCP for the first time, and ending with the honour of being her professional partner training a new group of PCP practitioners. She was one of very few people I have met who lived PCP, who made me intensely aware of PCP happening, here, and now.

I teach PCP in many settings, and I have Helen in mind always. I am different and more hands-on; my tendency is to structure and shape and steer and explain. But in so far as I can, sometimes, simply hold a space, offer an invitation, listen attentively, resist explanation, and let people make their own sense of things, then that is Helen at my shoulder.

Thirty eight years after that warm night in Bloomsbury and her initial invitation to “construe me”, this is, perhaps, my long overdue and forever grateful response.

About the author

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Mary Frances is a consultant and facilitator working with individuals, groups and organisations to support change and transition. She is also a teacher of PCP and constructivist theory and practice. She specialises in work with public services, education, and the arts, and her current interests include collaborative and practitioner research, storytelling & narrative, working with images & metaphor, and exploring the conversational change processes of everyday working life. She is the Director of the ICP International Lab.