In memoriam Andrew Cooper

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The death of Andrew Cooper this summer will be felt as a major loss for those familiar with psychosocial studies in the UK.

Like many of the best psychosocial thinkers he was committed not only to theory but also to practice. His contributions are numerous but his theoretical work is perhaps best represented by ‘Borderline Welfare: Feeling and Fear of Feeling’ (2005) written with Julian Lousada which lucidly and starkly presented the psychosocial impacts of shifts to neoliberal forms of ‘welfare’.

Perhaps his most valued contributions were in terms of his commitment to the development and protection of the profession of social work. His public interventions on issues of ‘child protection’ at times of crisis (such as in the aftermath of the Victoria Climbie and ‘Peter Connolly’ scandals) were thoughtful, important and valuable work. Entirely psychosocial in his approach, Andrew introduced important contextual elements to our understanding of organisational defences in the profession, extending Menzies-Lyth’s work to also consider paranoid defences in the face of attacks on the profession from the media, the public and policy makers. He also consistently encouraged and supported social work to demand a more significant space as a profession: to be less deferential and passive and to take a more assertive stand, though he well understood the difficulties in undertaking this.

Many social workers have benefitted from his development of the Professional Doctorate in Social Work at the Tavistock. Not only were graduates presented with a rigorous theoretical framework but also with the opportunity for personal reflection and development.

We present here a personal memoriam, given at the at the tribute to his life that followed his funeral, written by two people who knew him well.

Andrew Cooper: a personal in memoriam

Andrew Cooper, Professor of Social Work at the Tavistock Clinic/University of East London (UEL), died on 5 July 2023. He had fought his way back from a near-fatal illness the previous year, resuming his unique and deeply valued place in the lives of his family, friends and colleagues, and his psychotherapy practice. However, the
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legacy of cancer which he had as a young man, and the treatments for it then, led to a further crisis, which, even with his spirited hold on life, he could not come through.

Between us we had over 60 years of friendship and collegiality with Andrew, beginning in his pre-Tavistock days when he was Principal Lecturer at the institution soon to be known as the University of West London. Barry met him in 1987 at the first of the long-running series of ‘Psychoanalysis and the Public Sphere’ conferences based at UEL and organised jointly with the journal *Free Associations*. He was, from 1988, a key member of the conference organising group, and became an important presence in the network around the journal. Also, before he became Professor of Social Work at UEL in 1993, he was external examiner to the programme there in psychosocial studies on which we both worked. He was a thoroughly psychosocial thinker, grounded in both psychoanalysis and in his undergraduate discipline of philosophy.

Well-versed in a wide range of ideas from across the social sciences and humanities, he was clear about when it was necessary to focus on either the internal or external world. But at the base of all his thinking was his understanding of the interpenetration of the two, as is clear in his influential writings, on social work, the welfare sector and society more broadly. His work in the Tavistock Clinic as trainer, educator, clinician and manager, and in the extensive Tavistock/UEL collaboration which developed in the 1990s, was informed by his energetic intellectual life, as well as by his commitment to the institution of the Tavistock and its societal project to democratise psychodynamically informed health care.

One thing that was obvious about Andrew, in the early stages of getting to know him, was that if he asked something about your life, you felt he really wanted to know the answer. He was listening. His training as a psychotherapist and his need to stay in touch with his own internal world was quietly comforting. He quite boldly unearthed his own anxieties and struggles in his writing and in conversation, and this was also democratising. It was as though he was saying ‘We’re in it together; we all have complex emotional lives to navigate’. There was an earnestness to the questions he asked which took them out of the polite sphere and into a search for genuine understanding and connection. That search for connection was beautifully described in the memoir he wrote in the six months before he died. As his death approached (although it was reasonable for us all to hope that he might have had more time than he did), he sought to tie together various parts of his richly experienced life in a short book which he was still working on when he passed. He had already given us some fine writing, in his careful and complex observations on the interrelations between inner and outer worlds in welfare practices. But in his memoir, more than in previous writing, he trained his sharp gaze on his own life. We were able to read a draft of this memoir; it is fearless about vulnerability and trust, and is deeply moving. Looking back now, it feels like a gift to have been in such close conversation with Andrew in his final weeks.

Jo remembers chatting with Andrew over 20 years ago about relationships: which people were leaving long-term ones, who was trying to manage life on their own or starting anew. Andrew was all ears when she mentioned that Heather (his wife-to-be) had left a long-term relationship. It wasn’t long afterwards that we sat with Heather in a pub in Belsize Village, just up from the ‘Tavi’ where we had been teaching on the UEL/Tavistock MA in Psychoanalytic Studies. Andrew was just leaving the pub with friends and as he passed us, he homed in on Heather and with firm, confident resolve said “You and I should go for coffee.” We waited until
he’d gone to raise eyebrows and smile with Heather, at how she had just been so boldly propositioned. And so began their love affair and life together. This married life with Heather Price and their family life with Daniel and Rachael was central to Andrew being able to refer, in the title of his memoir, to his ‘good long life’. In that work, in existentialist fashion he urges us to remember that we die, so that we can live with more presence and truth. It reminded Jo of David Bowie making his final album *Black Star* in the year before he died, when he had cancer. That is not to compare Andrew with Bowie, though he might have been entertained and narcissistically pleased to be up there with revered artists. But the real link between the two is in the ability to make art out of the fragility and gift of life. With his typical focus and tenacious purpose, Andrew mined his own depths and offered his reflections on death and life.

Obituaries sometimes say the deceased ‘bore their illness’ with dignity, or resilience, or bravery. All those terms would apply to Andrew, and so would any others which described the great fortitude and spirit with which he endured the final year of his life. Despite the life-changing consequences of his illness last year, despite how close it brought him to death, despite how imperilled he must have felt thereafter, he was able to continue being the Andrew we had always known: self-possessed, direct, engaged with the world, addressing problems, asking open-minded questions, seeking to understand. His clinical sensibility meant that he was committed to being emotionally alive, even as his body weakened.

In addition to the stoicism, and the refusal of self-pity, he bore his illness with curiosity – although that is not really a strong enough word to describe the drive and insistence on truth with which he sought to understand what had happened to him, and even why. It was that sort of drive which decades before had led Andrew into the deep involvement in psychoanalytically based ideas and practices which underpinned his personal, professional and intellectual life. But his memoir is also thoroughly psychosocial, interweaving societal fears about death and vulnerability with his own encounter with them.

His commitments to people, values and ideas were very strong, but he was often the person in the room most likely to see the need for a different angle, a fresh approach. Andrew had a creative scepticism which was almost a kind of restlessness, intellectually. This meant that he observed the interpenetration of the internal and external in the institutions he was involved in, focusing on how they might sustain or inhibit forms of relationship and curiosity.

But of course he was also very grounded; there was a deep earthiness in him, not far beneath a surface which may at times have looked a bit austere. He knew well the importance of attachments to places – for him, key places were Bedfordshire, where he grew up (perhaps the source of the earthiness), and Coventry, where he had studied as an undergraduate (at the University of Warwick). He was naturally very pleased that against the odds Luton Town had just won promotion to the Premier League. It was always stimulating to check in with him, to hear what he thought about something in the news, to learn what he was thinking about, maybe to use him to ‘sanity check’ something. He could be relied upon to give an honest response.

Above all is the legacy he leaves in his family, and in the influence of his professional and scholarly work. We will ever be grateful for our long friendship with Andrew, and will deeply miss his steady presence, his sharp and fertile mind, and his attentive and rewarding companionship.
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