

Conference Report: The Legacy of Peter Lomas, 1923–2010

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Through his writing and teaching and his involvement in training, [Peter Lomas] established a space for critical and free thinking and a practice rooted in the values of ordinary humanity, intuition and humility.... Lomas was always deeply sceptical about the orthodox approach to the training of psychotherapists. It disregarded, he felt, the ordinary ways in which people helped others in distress.... 'The Outfit'... was a radical departure in therapy training where students would determine the curriculum and assess one another's readiness to practise. The training was based on ideas of mutuality and autonomy and the belief that genuine learning and creative exploration could take place only in the context of a free and open dialogue.

Paul Gordon, the Philadelphia Association

[Peter] was wonderfully encouraging and enthusiastic about initiatives in which non-professional people offered help to others.

Anne Ashley, founder of Parentline Plus UK

This was a conference that I was determined not to miss. Peter Lomas, who died at the beginning of 2010, was a key figure amongst a group of progressive, independently minded writers who have done so much to promote a deeply humane approach to, and understanding of, psychotherapy over recent decades.

Although a psychoanalyst by training, and with perhaps a deeper connection to the legacy of Freud than many of his admirers might realise (or, sometimes, wish to acknowledge), Peter Lomas's work is far more recognised and respected within the humanistic field than it is within orthodox psychoanalysis; for soon after graduating from his training he resigned from the Institute, and his many incisive and widely acclaimed subsequent writings have been virtually ignored by the psychoanalytic world. Nor should this be in the least surprising, given the way in which the institutions of psychoanalysis have historically treated anyone who stepped far enough away from Freud's path – not to mention the (to them) often heretical things that Peter had to say about psychoanalytic theory and practice. Someone at the conference told me how it wasn't unknown for Donald Winnicott himself not to attend a particular meeting because of 'how it would appear' to the Society; and any reading of Klein, Winnicott and many other psychoanalytic writers reveals how they repeatedly seem to be falling over backwards to claim their allegiance to and continuity with Freud, even in the very act of developing ideas that moved way beyond Freudian orthodoxy.

Over 50 people gathered in Cambridge to hear a series of talks from prominent people in the field who had a close association with Peter and/or his work – John Heaton, Paul Gordon, Sian Morgan, Stephen Logan and Lucy King. It was also very special that Peter's family was well represented on the day; and at the beginning we were told of

touching tributes and good wishes for the day that were sent by Michael Jacobs, Karen Maroda and Andrew Samuels. Throughout the day, the backdrop to proceedings were Peter's 'Seven Rules' of Psychotherapy that were displayed behind the speakers, which are previously unpublished, and which are appended to this article by kind permission of his family. These 'rules' do a great deal to convey the ordinarily extraordinary practitioner and human being that Peter Lomas was; but more on that later.

JOHN HEATON started off the proceedings with a talk on 'ordinary language', drawing heavily on his philosophical (Wittgensteinian) perspective on the practice of psychotherapy and how it throws much light on Peter's approach. John drew a clear distinction between ordinary and theoretical language, with Peter Lomas strongly privileging the former over the latter. Interestingly, we were told how Peter came to retrospectively regret his early theory-heavy technical writings in the field (though perhaps this leaves out of account the possibility that it might in some sense have been a necessary developmental phase for Peter to go through). John went on to speak of Galen as a very early (Greek) psychotherapist, and his book *The Diagnosis and Cure of the Soul's Passions* (which I resolved to pursue myself), and how the Greeks thought that a self-centred narcissism lay at the root of all human 'disorders'. Interestingly, like Freud Galen said that the kind of person that could be therapeutically helpful didn't need to be medically qualified.

John went on to speak of the dynamic interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary. The importance of *ordinariness* was a key theme in Peter Lomas's work (though as was pointed out later in the plenary, the notion of 'the ordinary', and what it might, and might not, consist in, is far from straightforward). We were told how Peter was very critical of those who felt their approach to be superior or somehow 'special' (one can sense how impatient Peter might have been with the psychoanalytic establishment's claim to be the 'gold standard' pinnacle of the therapy world). Peter also saw (a preoccupation with) theory as having a disabling and incapacitating effect upon human action, and for Peter, psychotherapy practice most decidedly did not need a special language. For we are immersed in our mother tongue in a way that specialist languages never can be, and ordinary language is threaded through with ambiguity, nuance, complexity, rhetoric and contradiction, and is above all immensely subtle in a way that computer language, with its drive to remove ambiguity and contradiction, never can be. A telling reference was made to the way in which the State is arguably attempting, via IAPT, to 'legislate into existence' the specialist language of CBT.

Paradoxically, perhaps, ordinary language has the capacity to engage with extraordinarily subtle levels of communicating and being. Thus, there exists no mapping of any special theoretical terms on to the ordinary-language conversations that therapist and client co-create. 'Understanding' is central, of course, but is also extraordinarily complex (and Wittgenstein strongly distinguished between *explanation* and understanding). Certainly, Peter Lomas found far more inspiration in works of literature than in theory or science, for the imagination is thereby freed, and not frozen as it can be with theory. For John Heaton, 'Our knowledge of people can never be as complete as it can be of a machine'.

More personally in relation to Peter, John told us about Peter's 'casual' or 'pseudo-casual' way, and that if one ever disagreed with Peter, there was always a subsequent exchange of letters, a dialogue and a working-through: Peter never burnt his boats with those who disagreed with him.

PAUL GORDON then talked to the ethical dimension of Peter Lomas's work, in a paper which he characterised as 'what do you do when you don't know what to do?'. Paul spoke of being strongly influenced by Peter's *Limits of Interpretation* and David Smail's *Taking Care*, and of Peter's humility, scepticism, wisdom, quiet anger and lack of pretension. He cited Peter and his work as having the greatest single influence on his own practice and how he thinks about his own work. Peter was a man who always questioned; and he focused in particular on what got in the way of a genuine meeting between two human beings. For Paul and for Peter, we perhaps lack a language to speak about the ethical without lapsing into banality or superficiality, so Peter went to literature – Blake, George Eliot, Edwin Muir.... Paul compared Peter's work with that of Levinas in terms of the primacy of ethics, the privileging and prioritising the other, and a return to the human soul. Citing the highly influential existential study *Towards Deep Subjectivity* by Roger Poole, Paul referred to how we are all necessarily moral agents with the capacity to think morally and ethically about how we should live. The notion of creating an 'ethical space' is central for Paul, one which is deeply democratic, and through which clients can find their way of living through *conversation*. Yet, we were also reminded, 'psychotherapy is a dangerous business'.

The notion of 'the ordinary' championed by Peter Lomas has always been central in the functioning of the Philadelphia Association's houses, and visitors, Paul told us, often can't tell the difference between the therapists, trainee therapists and the residents! Paul spoke of how resilient they find people to be in the PA's work, and he also spoke of 'negative capability', with therapists certainly not possessing a body of knowledge or 'facts' in any conventional sense – for 'What conceivable facts can we have about the human soul?'

Paul went on to say that there is no-one better as a guide in the world of psychotherapy than Peter Lomas. Ordinary language can, for Paul, be both 'fantastically rich and fanstastically limiting'. And Peter often referred to what lay beyond words.

SIAN MORGAN gave a far more personal address, in which she spoke movingly about her own experience of being a patient of Peter's, and picking up on major themes which they touched upon in their last conversation before he died. She started with football – with Peter being a Manchester United supporter who especially admired the genius that was the late George Best – a flawed genius, and amongst other things, a rebel, a wild boy, and a renegade. Best was 'a natural', just like Peter – an instinctively brilliant practitioner with a powerful holding presence. Sian had heard Peter referred to in a conversation (and not altogether meant favourably) as a 'wild analyst', and she went on to speak of Peter's

ability to embrace the tension between ‘wildness’ and the capacity to manage and contain the self.

Unsurprisingly, Peter was a great admirer of Ferenczi, and was much influenced by him and his courage, honesty, humility and creativity. For Ferenczi, the doctor must be involved in the case with all his heart, and must admit it when he isn’t; and Ferenczi was of course very critical of what he saw as the overly intellectual nature of Freudian psychoanalysis. For both Ferenczi and for Peter, passion and imagination, not theory, were central in therapy. For Peter, at its worst orthodox psychoanalysis was a passionless verbal exchange with the analyst in a withdrawn cocoon; and for him, creativity was the inevitable casualty of an obsession or preoccupation with technique. It was interesting to discover that the prominent member of the Independent group of psychoanalysts, Charles Rycroft, was Peter’s analyst, and his supervisors were Marion Milner and Donald Winnicott. Peter’s published writings were responded to with virtual total silence by orthodox psychoanalysis (an attempt to ‘ignore him to death’, perhaps, given his resignation from the Institute soon after qualifying), and he was also largely ignored by the Guild, which he co-founded with Ben Churchill and John Heaton in 1974 but then soon resigned from, before moving to Cambridge in 1980. Perhaps Peter had joined the highly distinguished list of therapists and analysts who, over many decades, had dared to challenge Freudian orthodoxy.

We were told how Peter was able to contain regression within containing ordinary conversation and relationship. Peter was a great admirer of Winnicott, but in 1973 he criticised him for his programmatic views on regression, for an overemphasis on idealisation and for his relative neglect of the father in his mother-centred formulations. In his analytic work, Peter was able to hold and contain primitive anxiety and anguish, and also to hold this over time.

Peter increasingly moved towards the view that therapy can be overprotective, and he believed that too much attention tended to be paid to the mother, and not enough to getting away from the mother towards the father. Peter’s writings conveyed the subtleties and nuances of human relationship beautifully, and although he might not have liked to hear it, he had a spiritual quality.

After lunch we divided up into five small discussion groups, focusing on a range of themes from ‘Doing good’ to ‘Creative ways of addressing the tyranny of convention’.

STEPHEN LOGAN then told us about his involvement in bringing to publication a book on ‘Natural Psychotherapy’ which Peter had been writing up to his death. Peter was very aware of humanity’s deep alienation from nature, and that in a world that is subject to technology, ‘audit’ and so on, it was essential that therapy resist these values and tendencies. Stephen poignantly referred to Peter’s ‘rare honesty’, his exceptional gifts as a writer, and with (as Peter saw it) cleverness being a very poor substitute for

intelligence. We heard also about the very close congruence between Peter's values and his practice as a therapist.

Finally, **LUCY KING** closed the day with a retrospective of both the day's proceedings and of Peter's life and work. Peter never sought or courted respectability, we were told; and he had a car sticker which proclaimed 'I'm for wildlife'!. We heard movingly about an extraordinary quality of light, both at Peter's funeral and also in his consulting room. We heard of psychoanalysis's retreat from nature, gesture and the body, all of which Peter deplored. And we again heard how ordinariness and clarity were central for Peter, and his warmth, generosity of spirit and humour consistently shone through.

Overall, this was a very satisfying conference, deeply affirming of many if not most of the core humanistic values that will be familiar to readers of *Self and Society*, and which were often anathema to the psychoanalytic world in which Peter cut his therapeutic teeth. In one conference discussion session, finally, I described how, in the mid 1990s, Peter had come out implacably against the Register (see below); and Lucy King confirmed that Peter did indeed hold firmly to this conviction to the end of his days.

Bob Mullan: What are your thoughts about the 'registration' process?

Peter Lomas: I am appalled by it.... I am not sure whether we wouldn't be better without it altogether.... I do not think that people realise how dangerous [a register] is and how careful one should be with it.... one should be very careful about what is considered irresponsible.... the control, the monitoring of the training of therapists is very destructive of creativity... the greatest threat to our creativity is the register.

(quoted in Mullan 1996: 87-8)

THE SEVEN RULES OF PSYCHOTHERAPY by PETER LOMAS *

Having studied psychotherapy for fifty years I have concluded that there are seven rules for successful practice.

- 1 Say to yourself each session, 'I am not Winnicott, nor Jesus Christ. I am Joe Soap, so help me God, and I know bugger all'.
- 2 All you have got is this person in front of you. He is your only hope. Perhaps he can tell you something, so listen. He is probably more intelligent than you. At least he is not so stupid as to be sitting in your seat.
- 3 Silence is golden. After a while say something, if only telling the patient the cricket score.

4 If you get into a rage, don't hit the patient. He might sue you. Just say 'I need a pee' and go out and meditate for a while. This rule is particularly important if the patient is a Turkish wrestler with homicidal tendencies.

5 The patient's money is precious, you mustn't be.

6 Do not worry if you find you are more screwed up than the patient. This is quite normal. It is called the Inequality of the Therapeutic Relationship.

7 Remember that you can never get it right.

These rules never fail. But if they do you could always try beach volleyball.

* With thanks to Jon Lomas, who read out Peter's rules at the service celebrating his life on 25 January 2010.

Books by Peter Lomas

True and False Experience: The Human Element in Psychotherapy, 2nd edn, Transaction Publishers, Piscataway, NJ, 1994 (orig. 1973)

The Case for a Personal Psychotherapy, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981

The Limits of Interpretation (2nd edn), Robinson Publishing, 2001 (orig. 1986)

Cultivating Intuition: A Personal Introduction to Psychotherapy, 2nd edn, Wiley-Blackwell, 2004 (orig. 1993)

Personal Disorder and Family Life, Transaction Publishers, Piscataway, NJ, 1997

Doing Good?— Psychotherapy Out of its Depth, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999

Natural Psychotherapy (in preparation/forthcoming)

Further Reading

Gordon, P. (2010) 'Peter Lomas obituary: Psychotherapist who broke free of dogma and convention', *The Guardian*, 24 February;
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2010/feb/24/peter-lomas-obituary>

King, L. (ed.) (1999) *Committed Uncertainty in Psychotherapy: Essays in Honour of Peter Lomas*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester

Lomas, P. (1968) 'Psychoanalysis – Freudian or existential?', in C. Rycroft (ed.), *Psychoanalysis Observed*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, pp. 116–44 (orig. 1966)

Lomas, P. (1997) 'The teaching of psychotherapy', in R. House and N. Totton (eds), *Implausible Professions: Arguments for Pluralism and Autonomy in Psychotherapy and Counselling*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books; 2nd edn, 2011 (in press), pp. 215–24

Lomas, P. and Mullan, B. (1996) Interview, in B. Mullan (ed.), *Therapists on Therapy*. London: Free Association Books

Richard House lectures in psychotherapy and counselling in the Research Centre for Therapeutic Education at Roehampton University. His books include *In, Against and Beyond Therapy* (2010), *Therapy Beyond Modernity* (2003), *Implausible Professions* (co-editor Nick Totton, 2nd edn 2011) and *Against and For CBT* (co-editor Del Loewenthal, 2008). Richard is a founder-member of the Independent Practitioners Network, the Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy, and the Open EYE Campaign, campaigning on educational issues in early childhood.