

Gianfranco Cecchin
Personal Recollections and Professional Legacies

Imelda Colgan McCarthy PhD

Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University College Dublin,
The Fifth Province Associates and Blue Star Counselling and Therapy
Centre, Trinidad.

Personal Recollections

On the 3rd February, 2004 as I was walking through Heathrow Airport on my way to catch a flight home to Dublin after a family therapy trip to Sweden and England, I turned on my mobile phone. I was certainly unprepared for the sad message that I would receive from my Fifth Province friend and colleague, Nollaig Byrne. I could hardly take it in that our dear friend Gianfranco Cecchin of the Milan Team was no more. Was it possible that this great character, this great rogue, this great therapeutic genius would no longer regale us with whatever novel idea was consuming and amusing him at the time. It just did not seem possible.

Mentorship

So many memories came to me as I walked towards that flight. These memories ranged from his first visit to Dublin in the summer of 1982 to the last time we spent together at a conference in 2002. That first time he came to Dublin is as vivid today as it was twenty-two years ago. He came to join Monica McGoldrick for a little holiday here with his daughter who was then six years old. Nollaig and Phil Kearney had met him and Luigi previously in New York and been enthralled with his liveliness of mind, his therapeutic wizardry and personality. During his brief stay in Dublin before going to Shannon to pick up his daughter, Suzanne, he sat with Nollaig, Phil and I in the Department of Child and Family Psychiatry of the Mater Hospital watching a tape of a family we called the Royal Family (McCarthy & Byrne, 1995). Although he could hardly have understood a word he made like he was madly interested and whatever the case, he remained interested in our work always. He became a kind of 'behind the scenes mentor' and with Luigi and the Bologna team, invited us to present at the Milan Centres during the eighties and nineties.

A De-Constructor of Humbug

Whenever, there was a conference it was taken for granted that we would hang out together. Nothing was off limits with Gianfranco. He really lived his ideas. He had a healthy irreverence for all things without ever descending to cynicism. No subject was too extreme, appalling or farcical to be explored. Everything was a part of life and to be explored with that wonderful mixture of curiosity and irreverence. These stances were no mere theoretical frames, they were a lived experience for him. In this (apart from his politics) we had the pleasure of talking across a great spectrum of subjects with him during the twenty odd years we knew him. The twins of curiosity and irreverence were never far from each other when we were together and in our own work in the fifth province approach.

On Feminism and Politics

Even though he did not understand feminism at first, he came around to being more attentive. Even here I remember his outrageousness. When wanting to be politically incorrect in relation to gender issues he would first scan the room for his feminist friends and then with eyes fixed on them he would become more and more outrageous and funny. As we laughed he would take it as permission to go one step further. As there was not a malicious bone in his body this was always taken in the humorous way it was meant. As for admitting 'politics' to enter the therapeutic arena he seemed constantly to hold himself aloof. When we presented at conferences where I would address the issues of poverty and women, he would ask, half in jest and half seriously, 'why don't you go to the UN?'

However, there was also a serious side to this so called flaunting of political correctness and political issues – Gianfranco had no time for humbug or for ideas that might become so fixed that minds began to close. His humour was both a call for openness and a deconstruction of fixed ideas. He never seemed to want to be caught in a category he could not get out of. He lived his life like that and was a constant challenge to others. I was going to say that he was gentle but that would not capture the spirit of Gianfranco. One could not say he was a gentle man but yet there was a gentleness to him that was quite indefinable.

Systemic Reflection and Positive Connotation

I can still hear Gianfranco today stating, "the system is as the system is, the system is perfect". Perhaps when the Milan team first uttered these words they were unaware of the huge influence this way of thinking would bring about. It not only led to the logic of positive connotation but it brought a sea-change in the consciousness of therapists. If something was perfect as it was in its own context then there was nothing to be purposefully done as such. Out went the paradoxical prescriptions at the end of sessions and in came a new respect for the intelligence in systems – both family and therapeutic systems. From my own experience a new trust in the wisdom within the total system in context became a hallmark of the work of the fifth province associates and also my own work today exploring Spirituality and Therapy. Through the challenging but appreciative questions individuals in family and therapeutic systems were invited into possibilities of a larger frame for reflection than was imagined previously. These systemic reflections brought me to a greater understanding of the elegant and graceful wisdom of relational systems. Positive connotation was the platform for the development of the fifth province dis-position of love - the appreciation of and openness to others in conversation. The refocusing from the verb 'to be' towards the verb, 'to show' began to illuminate very clearly that people were neither their problem or their behaviour. Totalising descriptions were no longer admitted in an ethical, co-constructed therapeutic relationship.

The Teams Conferences of the 1980's

In my PhD I acknowledged Gianfranco's and Luigi's role in my professional life. I am truly sorry that I will never have the pleasure again of Gianfranco coming to stay in my home, drinking Irish whiskey and listening to him regaling us all with his provocative views and humour. I am so glad that I had the pleasure of celebrating his sixty-fifth birthday with him which coincided with the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Milan Institute. He and Luigi invited their friends to share this happy occasion with them in the North of Italy some years ago. It was a party to end parties. We were all there. It was good that in his life we got to celebrate these milestones. As I said at his funeral mass in a brief eulogy, Gianfranco with Luigi have influenced the lives of millions. When we think of all the conferences and workshops in all the countries over the thirty

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years that they traveled it is truly marvelous. Also lest it be forgotten, during the 1980's each year teams of invited therapists met around them each summer. We called these gatherings simply, the Teams' Conferences. The whole array of collaborative approaches were spawned during this period. It was a generative period with much of the inspiration coming from Gianfranco and Luigi and the gentle mentorship of Lynn Hoffman.

A farewell Irish Blessing recited at his commemorative mass in Milan

May the road rise to greet you,
may the wind be ever at your back,
may the sun shine warm upon your face,
may the rain fall gently at your feet.
Until we meet again, may God hold you in the hollow of His hands.
Until we meet again may God hold you in the hollow of Her hands.

Thank you Gianfranco you will never be far away. May you rest in peace