

Lynn Hoffman
wordsmith and weaver of relational webs

Imelda McCarthy

10 September 1924 – 21 December 2017

“You have to find the underground river and launch yourself upon it”
(Hoffman 2002 p 255)

Lynn Hoffman, one of family therapy’s most lyric chroniclers and pioneers died peacefully of pneumonia early on the morning of the Winter Solstice, December 21, 2017. She was 93 years old and passed in the arms of her beloved partner, Ed McAvoy. I think she would have liked the day and manner for her passing. Ed, 91 and her soul mate followed her twenty days later as they had apparently envisaged and wished. They did not want to be alone without each other at this stage in their lives. Lynn was always an ‘intuit’ and was forever talking about underground streams and rivers, the thing in the bushes, hands touching in sand and other such metaphors. Her metaphors were her attempts to poetically describe what was glimpsed but beyond words. Their passing, so close together, was surely one final and to use one of Lynn’s favourite words, ‘grand’ foreseeing.

I first met Lynn at her apartment in New York in 1981. She always wanted to come to Ireland, which was the reason for the meeting not that Lynn would ever ask directly. (McCarthy 2015) It is just that connections were made and things happened. I had also wanted to meet her as I had just finished her book, Foundations of Family Therapy (1981). She came later that year and changed our lives forever. A hilarious account of that first visit to Ireland is recounted by her in her last book, Family Therapy: an intimate history (2002 pp 125 - 128).

The 80’s teams conferences – collaborative starbursts

In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s Lynn was hugely instrumental in inviting international systemic teams to come together to share their work. In the summer of 1983 Lynn, with Monica McGoldrick and Nollaig Byrne invited about forty participants to Ireland at a now famous culinary hotel, Ballymaloe House in Cork. This was to be a turning point for our Fifth province Associates team. From then on we were connected into a lively international web. It was also at this conference that we were to meet the AGS Team of Mia Andersson, Klas Grevelius and Ernst Salamon from Stockholm who were part of Lynn’s network. Initially, these teams formed around the nucleus of the Milan Team that was Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo. However, as the teams found their own voices, they constituted a loose network and came to be called by Lynn, the Post-Milan teams. In fact I would go further than that and say that Lynn’s teams’ conferences were the cradle of much of what was to become the postmodern, dialogical, collaborative therapies that emerged through the nineties and into the new Millennium!

These conferences began in the North East of the USA and were held in Oxford (UK) twice, Cork (Ireland), Galveston (USA) and Galway (Ireland). They

paralleled the Milan yearly training intensives in Italy, the rise of Brief Solution Focused work, Narrative therapy, Just Therapy and also the Women's Colloquia in New England and Denmark (1984, 1986 1990). In the 1990s Lynn also hosted conferences along the same lines in Dartington Hall (UK). It was an exciting and generative time not only in the emergence of these newer ideas and practices but also in the emergence of the voices of the marginalized across the spectra of gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability, sexual orientation, social justice and so on. A sensitivity towards practices which held potential for colonial intent or effect began to hold sway across the emerging practices. We visited each other's centres and dialogued in relation to the contrasts and similarities in our work. We learned from each other about the significance of cultural applicability and sensitivity. We became friends and towards the end of the eighties we saw the publication in *Family Process* of material from those who participated in the team's conferences.

These publications included the paper from Harry Goolishian and Harlene Anderson on "Human Systems as Linguistic Systems" (Anderson & Goolishian 1988). Tom Anderson published on *Reflecting Processes* inviting Lynn and myself to help him in the preparation of that first paper in English. (Andersen 1987). 1988 also saw the first international publication in the same journal of my own team's work on the Fifth Province, Mis-Taken Love. (McCarthy & Byrne, 1988). In all of this weaving, Lynn was very much the godmother, midwife, chronicler and creativity spotter of work around the systemic world in its move from a mechanical systems orientation in its (co-) evolutionary journey through its cybernetic, constructivist, social constructionist and dialogical phases and sensitivities. All through Lynn's relationships are threaded through with the ideas of Bateson so those she connected with were also quite strongly Batesonian. But, now let me go back to the beginning of Lynn's story.

A Gracefilled Life

Grace Lynn Baker was born into an American artistic community in Paris on 10th September 1924. Her mother was the recognised American, Art Deco textile designer, Ruth Reeves who was also one of the two creators of the American Index of Design. Her father was Donald Baker, an engineer. Lynn grew up, the eldest of three sisters in a New York bohemian community where they were often referred to as the 'Bronte Sisters'. Her parents separated in 1940 when Lynn was around sixteen years old and she also survived both sisters in life. She was blessed with three main relationships with Ted (Theodore) Hoffman, with Irish writer Maurice Noel Hennessy, who motivated her to travel and write again after her retirement and lastly with her wonderful and loving partner of the last six years, Ed McAvoy who had worked with the New York Times.

Throughout her life Lynn excelled, although she always wore her genius lightly. She gained scholarships to some of the best educational institutions in New York, The Dalton and Horace Mann Schools. She also gained the Regional New York Scholarship to study at Radcliff College, which functioned as a female coordinate institution for the all-male Harvard College. It was also one of the Seven Sisters Colleges, which paralleled the Ivy League Colleges for men at that time. They had the popular reputation of having a particularly intellectual, literary, and independent-minded student body so we can see where Lynn had her formation. Lynn was proud,

as were her daughters, of this background and especially that she graduated from Radcliffe Summa Cum Laude (with the highest distinction) in English Literature. She initially worked in Secretarial work interspersed with writing small pieces and editing, which earned her an income from time to time.

Lynn's early writings were important in the beginning phases of her marriage to her first husband, Ted as he progressed through his own academic and thespian career. She was a stay at home mother to her own three daughters, Martha, Joanna and Livia. Throughout her young married life, Lynn spoke about being acutely aware of the discriminations against her gender and was never able to satisfy her life urges as the family became, as she described it, "human flea's" moving from one campus to another as her husband's star rose. One piece of writing amusingly and tellingly entitled, 'Your husband is an investment' actually underwrote Ted's M.A. degree at Columbia! Unfortunately, their marriage was not to last and they divorced in 1975. However, before coming back to New York with her husband they had lived for some time in Menlo Park, California where she was first introduced to Virginia Satir who was looking for someone to help her in the writing of Conjoint Family Therapy. From here, she was introduced, by Satir, to the world of the Mental Research Institute and especially to Don Jackson and Jay Haley. A new life began.

From curious novice to pioneering visions

As she wrote with and watched Virginia Satir at work she became very interested in family therapy and Don Jackson invited her to join a small group at MRI. Here she also had a chance to read the transcripts of the 'Bateson Project'. All this was to lead her in 1969 to a Masters in Social Work at Adelphi University, New York with a specialization in Family Therapy and a life long love of the ideas of Gregory Bateson. Later in her life she would also develop an admiration for the work of his two daughters, Mary Catherine and Nora.

Her journey took her to co-authoring, 'Techniques of Family Therapy' (1967) with Jay Haley with whom she claimed she was in love with for some years and that she would have loved to have shared a conference plenary platform with him. She worked with Salvador Minuchin and his team at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic before senior staff post with the Ackerman Institute of Family Therapy. Here, she joined up Peggy Penn with whom she published, 'Milan Systemic Family Therapy' (Boscolo et al 1987) celebrating their joint love of 'Milan'. Any paper Lynn wrote turned new ground in our field and planted seeds for new shoots. She had the uncanny knack of seeing directions before they happened. In her conversations with Harlene Anderson and Christopher Kinman for the film of her ideas, 'All Manner of Poetic Disobedience.' (Kinman 2012) she talked about her work with 'a people who were not yet'. She was always a great his/herstorian in our field and a seer of futures as yet unfolded.

Alongside her family therapy teaching and practice she also maintained her connection with her social work background teaching at the Hunter School of Social Work in New York, at Smith College School of Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts and she was an adjunct lecturer at the Marriage and Family Program at St. Joseph's College in West Hartford, Connecticut.

Conferences and workshops and her crafting of a community in Europe

Not only was Lynn Hoffman a wonderful, poetic writer, she was a much sought after workshop and conference presenter. Her demeanor could fool one into thinking that she was a frail woman but that would belie her intellectual rigour, her wisdom and intuition, her warmth and her 'wicked' sense of humour. She had a way of wrapping everyone she met in a tapestry of storied brilliance. One came away from meetings with her feeling empowered and full of possibilities. While she held ideas passionately and strongly she was always curious and never afraid to change the course of her sails, which she did many times moving through first and second order systems thinking, radical constructivism, social constructionism and on into her later fascination with underground streams of relating, starfish organisations and the rhizome metaphor

I will leave the last words to my wonderful friend and old team mate, Nollaig Byrne, who said of Lynn

“An artistic and literate spirit, Lynn reached out to us with the lightest touch. Her thinking was free and original. She breathed poetry into our concerns and restored what was otherwise painful, mundane or ordinary into lighter forms. She brought us into a golden time...”

May Lynn rest in peace and the knowledge of a life very well lived

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Nollaig Byrne my old team colleague in our Fifth Province Team and Ellen Landis who was a much loved mentee of Lynn's, a wonderful friend who supported her in her last years and was with her in her final hours. Also thanks to Harlene Anderson who read the first draft. All three commented on and contributed to this piece. Finally I want to acknowledge, Philip Messent, Editor of the **Journal of Family Therapy** for his generous permission to use an earlier version as part of this commemoration of Lynn. The earlier version appears in the *Journal of Family Therapy*: 40 (2) 2018.

References

- Andersen, T. 1987 "The Reflecting Team: Dialogue and Meta-Dialogue in Clinical Work", *Family Process*, 26: 415 - 428
- Anderson, H. & Goolishian, H. 1988b. Human systems as linguistic systems: Evolving ideas about the implications for theory and practice. *Family Process* 27:371-393.
- Bateson, G. 1972 *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Boscolo, L., Cecchin, G., Hoffman, L. & Penn, P. 1987 *Milan Systemic Family Therapy*. New York: Basic Books
- Brafman, O. & Bekstrom, R.A. 2007 *The Starfish and the Spider: The unstoppable power of leaderless organizations*.
- Hoffman, L. 1981 *Foundations of Family Therapy*. New York: Basic Books

- Hoffman, L. 2002 *Family Therapy: An Intimate History*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Kinman, C. 2007 “Rhizome and the Gift: Two metaphors that revolutionise the Human Service Industry”
(<http://christopherkinman.blogspot.com/2007/12/rhizome-and-gift.html>)
- Kinman, C. 2012 *All Manner of Poetic Disobedience: Lynn Hoffman and the Rhizome Centuary*. A Christopher Kinman Film. Vancouver: Rhizome Productions. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjR3nP_VHR8
- McCarthy, I.C. & Byrne, N.O’R. 1988 “Mis-Taken Love: Conversations on the Problem of Incest in an Irish Context”. *Family Process*. 27: 181 - 199
- McCarthy, I. 2015 “Lynn Hoffman – A weaver of webs, people and stories”. *Metaogos*: 27 (July) 1 - 18
- Satir, V. 1964 *Conjoint Family Therapy*: Palo Alto: Science and Behaviour Books.