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OBITUARY

Appreciations of Ursula Fausset (1928–2016)

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Ursula Fausset, who died on the 13 June 2016, was a longstanding psycho-spiritual practitioner held in high regard by those who worked with her, or knew her as a friend or colleague. She was also the inspired founder of a successful institution, the Gestalt Centre, London. She was respected for her independence and creativity, admired for her openness and willingness to expose her vulnerabilities, and appreciated for her infectious humour, sense of fun, love of parties, and colourful and unorthodox dress sense.

Ursula lived long enough to realize she had become an historic figure – a pioneer from the beginning days of the Human Potential Movement in Britain. She embodied its basic values throughout her life. For many of us, the subsequent era of therapy professionalization brought respectability, but at the expense of losing some of the energy of the early days. Ursula resisted the rush to becoming academic and diploma-driven. She carried on practising as a therapist and teacher largely in an unchanged manner, working conscientiously and to good effect over decades, supporting numerous clients. This continuity did not signify a static or unchanging approach – far from it: Ursula identified with a Gestalt orientation as her basic grounding, but never fixed on one way of working. She sampled new techniques and approaches that arrived – usually from the USA – and incorporated a number of them into her practice. Her learning had another distinctive feature: she would want to 'field test' ideas and practices by applying them to her own life first. For Ursula, working with others and working with oneself proceeded together – demonstrating a commitment to 'being professional' in a very different sense.

She was also keen to integrate two domains often kept apart: psychological investigation and spiritual exploration. Ursula believed they went hand in hand, capturing this emphasis in two small booklets she wrote and printed – one on 'Truth', the other on 'Forgiveness'. She was critical of spiritual seekers attempting to bypass the need to investigate their most basic habits of thought and feeling. Indefatigable in her own search for spiritual enlightenment and inner peace, she finally found the approach which worked for her best: she pursued the Diamond Approach of A. H. Almaas for the remaining 20 years of her life.

Born in 1928, Ursula lived through the Second World War as a teenager, and the socially conservative 1950s as a young adult. Her father was a severely traumatized First World War veteran, her mother his caretaker; they existed on his small pension. She experienced some happy pre-war times living in the New Forest before the family moved to Hertfordshire, where she went to grammar school and acquired a first taste for rebellion. Under pressure, she trained as a nurse even though she wanted to enter art school. She survived the harsh regime to become a State-Registered Nurse, but did not pursue a nursing career. By this time, the cultural and sexual revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s were rendering obsolete much of the social conformity that dominated Ursula's generation up to that

time. Waves of change swept through British society, and Ursula surfed the waves. In her readable and intimate autobiography, *Much Ado About Me: An Unreliable Autobiography* (see Fausset, 2014), Ursula describes in sometimes stark detail her experiences of nursing; her various love affairs and being jilted; her life as an art student, potter, wife and mother; her overseas travels as a trainer; and her frequent moves of home.

She had ongoing struggles with her health. Born two months premature, she nearly died then, and following a traumatic three-months stay in hospital aged two-and-a-half, her life again 'hung on a thread'. On both occasions, her mother nursed her back to health and strength, while giving Ursula a repeated message that she was 'weak' or 'delicate' – labels which she fought against all her life. However, there were long periods through her life when Ursula needed to retreat, rest, or curtail contact with others. Her tenacity and spirit, scepticism towards the medical profession, and careful self-management health-wise, obviously paid off, as she lived into her late eighties as a fundamentally healthy woman till the very end. In her final years, living in the compatible ambience of Totnes, Devon, she took to sitting in a coffee house in lively conversation with younger customers.

Ursula had two long intimate relationships, and several short ones. She was married – very happily, it seems – for over 25 years to Shelley, an artist and the father of her children. However, her switching focus from pottery and art to therapy and personal growth was too much: he resisted joining her, and she grew away from him. Later, she had a long, emotionally charged, and constantly shifting relationship with an American, Charles Sherno, which lasted to the end of her life.

Of central attention in her world were her rich, varied and ever-evolving relationships with her four daughters – Andrea, Kharis, Lucia and Martha – all of whom ended up living near her, and in differing ways caring for her. Before they were born, Ursula had had many miscarriages, and almost gave up hope of being a mother. Her willingness to follow an independent path medically resulted in successful pregnancies – and led to life fulfilment.

In the last decade of her life, Ursula became a serious campaigner for the 'right to die'. She wrote articles – one in a medical journal – about the appalling end years for many of those in care homes. She was loud in signalling 'no resuscitation', and kept 'a little box of pills' in case she did not want to go on. She spoke freely about death, and insisted on dying at home, with three days when friends could view her body. She planned her funeral and natural burial herself. It was a moving occasion, marked by shared affection. The number of lives that intersected with Ursula's – clients, students, friends, colleagues, or fellow seekers after 'Truth' – must be measured in thousands. She left so many touched and appreciative for having known her, for having played in the fountain of her creative spirit. An instruction at the funeral was that at the party afterwards we should dance.

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Ursula by Gaie Houston

Here was a person who, in the words of the book title, truly risked being alive. She took like a duck to water to the Gestalt encouragement to stay aware of that edge between

succumbing to habit, or leaping into the void. Ursula often leapt, with a recklessness that many saw simply as free and joyful. This was the message of the 1970s – to lose inhibition, and take life as an adventure rather than a compromise with social norms.

In that mythic decade, she used her house in Hampstead to run Gestalt groups, strongly influenced by the teaching of Ischa Bloomberg, a clinical psychologist who had been a member of the New York Gestalt Institute founded by Fritz and Laura Perls.

The history of the 1970s in the UK shows the gradual evolution, or change at least, of encounter and self-development groups into psychotherapy and counselling trainings. Ursula was an enthusiastic part of that early experimental time of student-run courses, of questioning authority and owning it oneself.

Once the seventies were over, Ursula gave her training organization to three of her students, John and Judith Leary Joyce and Peggy Sherno, and it became the Gestalt Centre, London – the only dedicated Gestalt Institute in the capital.

Gone were the days when a teapot at Ursula's house was the organization's exchequer. No more would she be there to throw handfuls of bank notes into the air at a training session, just to find what the hell everyone did with them. She really did that once at least. Way back then, Peggy Sherno recalls

> Coming back once on a night ferry with her, the front of the boat was out of bounds because of rough seas. Red rag to a bull, Ursula went under the barrier because she wanted to stand right up in the prow where she could feel the wind and spray on her face.

Then the world settled back from the days of challenge, risk, of flower power and hippie clothes. Accountancy became a popular trade for young graduates. Seekers into the depths of the psyche began to want a qualification to prove what they were at, and accreditation, a complaints procedure, the professional safeguards that to Perls and probably to Ursula were, if not anathema, very very boring.

The memory of Ursula Fausset deserves to be passed on as an inspiration to the generations coming up, who are faced with the world of depressive realism, climate change, mass migration, and more. The edge between frightened habit and joyful recklessness, a leaping into the void, is showing ever more starkly. May the void be fertile, as it often was for her.

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