

## **Remembering Peter F. Schmid**

**Brian Thorne and Gillian Proctor fondly remember  
an icon of the person-centred community**

### **Dr Peter F. Schmid: A Personal Reflection**

**Brian Thorne**

Peter Schmid died on 15 September 2020, and I still cannot quite believe or fully accept that he is no longer with us. I am only gradually coming to terms with the enormous gap he has left in my life and in the lives of his countless friends and colleagues throughout the world.

At the beginning of October last year (2019), Peter drove me and my travelling companion, Charlotte Carter, to his house on the hill above Vienna, where we were to have supper with him and his wife, Lilly, and to enjoy an evening of sparkling conversation and incomparable companionship. We spoke in English in deference to Charlotte's somewhat rudimentary German, and she said later that she was amazed at the rapidity with which she was effortlessly incorporated into the prevailing intimacy of the occasion. She had not met Peter and Lilly before, but by the end of the evening she felt she had known them for a long time. She also felt hugely respected and validated by them without a trace of condescension.

Peter and I recognised each other as soul-friends from the outset of our relationship, which was to last over many decades. We both knew Carl Rogers, were passionate about the person-centred approach, and felt it a duty and a joy to promote its study and practice through our professional work and writings. We also shared theological and literary backgrounds, and our recognition of the spiritual undergirding of the approach made us unusual and sometimes controversial figures in the person-centred international community. Both of us, too, were fiercely critical of those who castigated the approach for its intellectual superficiality and naïve understanding of human nature. On the contrary, the more we lived and practised the person-centred way of being, the more we appreciated its profundity, its rootedness in classical and Christian traditions, and the sheer complexity of its implications for self and society.

Peter was a prolific and elegant writer, and his many books and articles have had a profound

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influence on the development of the approach not only in Europe but further afield. He was greatly touched by the honours bestowed on him by the American Psychological Association and, nearer home, by the granting to him of the freedom of the City of Vienna, where so much of the history of psychotherapy has been played out. He was also a fine lecturer, and had the ability to hold an audience enraptured, especially when he was elucidating philosophical issues or seeking to throw light on subtle therapeutic processes which lesser mortals would not even have glimpsed.

Peter was also an accomplished dramatist and an energetic actor and stage director. It is altogether appropriate that in more recent times he produced his own 'Faust', replete with lively songs, much humorous dialogue and full of material relevant to contemporary debates. His admiration for Shakespeare and Goethe was another facet of the common ground that we shared.

For several years I had the privilege of being a visiting facilitator on the renowned Austria Programme which Peter and his colleagues provided annually as a major training opportunity for participants from many parts of Europe. Peter's contribution to these events was prodigious, and his amiable, and sometimes brooding, presence ensured that challenges were offered to experienced therapists and first-year students alike. Peter had the ability to cultivate a safe environment where risk-taking was possible but foolhardiness avoided. The picture of Peter sitting in a community meeting clutching a large mug of coffee, apparently dreaming but actually wide awake, is an image which I shall always treasure.

A final vignette. In 2004 I had a heart attack the day before the opening of a large international conference (on therapy and spirituality) at the University of East Anglia. I had been one of the

principal organisers of this conference, and I now had the galling and frustrating experience of languishing in a hospital bed while, only a mile away, the conference was beginning and my initial keynote lecture was being delivered by a colleague. Two days later as I began tentatively to potter around the ward, an eruption of life burst upon the scene in the forms of Peter Schmid and Martin van Kalmthout, bearing gifts and the greetings of the conference participants.

Peter's energy and encouragement, ably supplemented by Martin's, were, I am sure, the chief reason why, later in the week, I was able to persuade my cardiologist to grant me leave of absence so that I could make a somewhat pale appearance on the last day of the conference. Soul-friends are good for the body as well as for the mind and spirit.

During that memorable supper party last October as I write, I must confess that I fleetingly wondered whether it might be the last time Peter and I would meet. I was, of course, thinking of my own demise and not his, for he was 13 years my junior. It was I, however, who left Peter and Lily's home that evening feeling younger and much enlivened, the recipient of an intangible gift that Peter offered to so many of his friends and colleagues. I am so glad to have known him. May he rest in peace in the hands of God although I am sure that he will be mightily active as he explores 'untrodden terrain'.

Brian Thorne, Norwich, October 2020

## Appreciating Peter Schmid

Gillian Proctor

Peter Schmid sadly died as a result of a car accident in September 2020. I can't possibly do justice to his prolific writing and the importance of it for so much of our understanding of the

person-centred approach (PCA), but I wanted to say something of the importance he has had for me in our community.

I first met Peter in 2000 at the first World Association (WAPCEP) conference in Chicago. He was clearly a leading figure in the inauguration of this world association, with its purpose of liaison and academic legitimacy for the approach across the world. It was clear as soon as I heard him speak how fortunate it was for the PCA community to have Peter. His commitment and clarity to what was needed politically were brilliant. His contribution to the academic legitimisation of the approach was phenomenal. This was crucial for the survival of the approach in the climate of misunderstandings, including that compared to psychoanalytic approaches, the PCA was seen as theoretically or intellectually lightweight, and compared to CBT, research-light. Peter made a massive contribution to providing the evidence to counteract these false beliefs, both in his own deeply intellectual writing and through his website, which collected PCA academic resources.

Peter had a style of writing that was systematic, almost formulaic. Whatever concept he was considering, he first deconstructed the etymology, and then considered its meaning in the light of philosophy. His writing introduced me to the work of the philosopher Levinas, for which I am very appreciative. By drawing attention to the philosophical underpinnings of the PCA, he created a sense of the approach to be both profound, transformative and inherently simple.

For me, one of his most important contributions to the approach was to emphasise the inherent relational nature of the concept of ‘person’ (Schmid, 2002), thus counteracting the myths of PCT being individualistic, and that the principle of non-directivity should lead the therapist to

disappear as a person in the service of the client. For Peter this was clearly false – and indeed, encounter between unique and different people is necessary for therapy and transformation.

Peter not only ensured the importance of people as relational as well as autonomous, but always emphasised our existence in a social world, arguing that PcT is a sociotherapy, and always an inherently political venture (Schmid, 2014/2007).

Each time I was fortunate enough to hear Peter present his work, even though his ideas were often already familiar to me, I never failed to be moved by the beauty of his thought and expression of his ideas. I am so grateful for the huge amount of time he dedicated to thinking about and communicating his understanding of the approach, and sadly mourn our loss of his continued presence.

## References

- Schmid, P. (2002). Person: Etymology, history, Person-centred approach.
- Schmid, P. (2014/2007). Psychotherapy is political or it is not psychotherapy: the person-centred approach as an essentially political venture. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 12 (1): 4–17.

All of Peter’s articles and presentations are normally available on his website at <https://pfs-online.at/> (not currently active, as at 20 January 2021).