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## **Coming into her own: Counselling Cecily style**

In July 1975, Cecily commenced private practice as a counsellor and psychotherapist at her home in O'Connor, running groups as well as seeing individuals and couples. One thing led to another and Cecily eventually embarked on a career as a well-regarded and respected psychotherapist. Over a period of three years, Cecily's practice grew as word-by-mouth recommendations provided her with a solid client base. In May 1978, Cecily and Robert moved into a two-storey, dignified home that backed onto a reserve on the hillside of Curtin. Its downstairs area of two rooms, a bathroom and its own entrance made an ideal studio for Cecily in which to run her counselling practice. Here Cecily could talk with her clients in a lounge room atmosphere. Shelves of books, paintings on the walls, pot plants and casual furniture created a peaceful ambience with a comfortable balance between the professional and the personal. One of Cecily's clients recalled a plant cutting in a pot protected from the frost by plastic wrapping sitting outside Cecily's door and saw it as a nurturing symbol.

Meredith interviewed many of Cecily's former clients from which, collectively, we try to convey a picture of how Cecily came across to them and an idea of her counselling style. According to those interviewed, Cecily greeted clients with an open, unpretentious smile and she exuded warmth. She offered them a couch to sit on and settled herself in a chair opposite with a coffee table between them. She would sit with her legs crossed, her hands in her lap, waiting for her client to speak. There were often moments of silence in her sessions, but not uneasy ones. She did not

try and fill silences with chatter. She did not indulge in small talk. This accords with our own recollections of Cecily; in her social interactions, if Cecily asked someone how they were, she expected an honest, rather than a merely polite, reply. If she talked about the weather, it was because there was something different or wonderful about it that was worth commenting on.

In developing her own style, Cecily heeded Jung's approach that, for the purpose of therapy, the problem is always the whole person, never the symptom alone; and true to Jung's teachings that each person is different, Cecily individualised her approach to her clients rather than using any special techniques. She sent one client away with children's books to read. She often encouraged her clients to write down their feelings or thoughts, and sometimes she would ask the client to draw what she or he had just said or felt. She had felt pens and paper on hand. She asked questions that often took her clients out of their frame, to somewhere else, in order to give them a different perspective of where they were at in their lives. She would answer questions by asking more, rather than providing answers.

Her former clients talked about Cecily as warm, supportive and non-judgemental. She was perceived as encouraging, always calm, empathetic and an 'active' listener. A former client – I will call her Mary, not her real name – described the power of Cecily's understated style. Cecily did not say much to her at all on their first meeting; she just listened and asked her some gentle questions about her earlier life that, at the time, seemed unrelated to the issues of concern that Mary had raised. Mary started to cry at her first meeting with Cecily in the course of her response; crying was something she rarely did. Later, Mary became self-aware of the links between matters that occurred during her childhood and the relationship issues that had brought her to see a counsellor. By getting her to deal with some buried emotions, Cecily had provided Mary with a glimpse of someone different from whom Mary thought she was. Mary found it an uncomfortable experience but it helped her to make a decision about a relationship she was in. In effect, Cecily had given Mary a 'tiny nudge' in the right direction – like a 'tiny mirror' reflecting back what she had felt.

Another client – I will call her Kim – saw Cecily after Kim's father had died and she had then separated from her boyfriend. She felt she could not 'move on' after these events. She had never been to a counsellor before. She found Cecily in the phone book, later deciding it was a fortunate choice. One of the first questions Cecily put to Kim was: 'Tell me about

your childhood.’ It seemed an unusual question, unrelated to why she had come to see Cecily, so Kim gave her a brief and sanitised version. Over the next two years, Cecily ‘peeled [Kim] back like an onion’, gently, but with persistence. She sent Kim home with library books that Kim read in case Cecily questioned her on them. Over time it became clear to Kim that the reason she had such difficulty getting over her father’s death had roots in her childhood. There were times during the therapy and after that she would become angry because ‘once the layers are peeled off, you cannot go back’. Overall, Kim described the time she had with Cecily as ‘like entering another universe’. Reflecting back on her life decades later, Kim regarded her time with Cecily as a turning point; it changed how she saw her life and herself. Over the next 30 years, although Kim did not see Cecily again, she always remembered her and, in her words, ‘You don’t need to be with a therapist for therapy to go on’.

There were times when Cecily broke from being non-judgemental in order to be firm or directive. On one occasion, a client – I will call her Sandra – showed Cecily a letter from her mother that had distressed her. Cecily said, ‘I can hold onto that letter for you’, and did. Later, Sandra surmised that Cecily did this because she saw, but did not say, that Sandra’s mother had been emotionally manipulating her daughter. Mostly playing a passive role, at times, Cecily would see a need to strongly interact at several levels. On another occasion, according to Sandra, Cecily said, ‘You must not do that’, in response to something Sandra talked to Cecily about. Even so, Cecily appeared to be on a journey with her, not directing her. Sandra was another client who said Cecily had changed her life.

One of Cecily’s clients who she saw in 1972 for many years had been sexually abused as a child, long before child sexual abuse and incest were truly understood. Lucy – not her real name – having gained insight from her sessions with Cecily on how the trauma had affected her, re-entered the workforce to discover that she was not a lone survivor of sexual abuse. From talking about it, she was able to encourage others to do so.

Cecily had a client who, in the late 1980s, had suffered stress at work. She told her colleagues at work that Cecily helped her, and two of them went to see Cecily too. They went because they were suffering from stress at work, but all three had very different personal lives and problems. Cecily built up the self-worth of each, made them feel okay so that they could cope with the stressors in their lives. She made helpful suggestions and observations, sometimes ‘giving permission’ to limit contact with

a relative, even a mother, who might be causing them distress; she drew out what, given their emotional morass, they could not work out for themselves. She helped people reflect rather than react.

Cecily was careful about what she revealed about herself to her clients. Sometimes she talked about something personal to help illustrate a point. On one occasion, Cecily told a client, I will call her Jane, that when Cecily had had an operation on her eye – probably a cataract removal – the anaesthetic had had an adverse effect on her. She explained that she managed to counter the side effects by managing her diet. Jane took this as an illustration of how Cecily took some control of her own life by being an equal participant in the medical process rather than placing herself entirely in her doctor's hands. The message Jane received was that Cecily encouraged her clients to participate in their counselling relationship with her. Jane had been completing a psychology degree at ANU at the time. But it was Cecily, more than the course, that Jane said had enabled her to see herself through her own eyes rather than through the eyes of others. When Jane's counselling sessions finished, Cecily gave her a book of poems by Kahlil Gibran. In a moment of self-revelation, she also gave Jane a Haiku poem she wrote herself, beautiful in its simplicity:

Through open windows enters  
Silent dawn bringing  
A hundred bird songs.

Jung believed that dreams inform us and Cecily embraced this idea. A regular question she would ask was: 'What have you been dreaming about?' When a client described a dream, Cecily would ask: 'What do you think that might mean?' An exploration of the interpretation that often as not opened up a path to assist that person's self-awareness.

Cecily expanded her practice to include therapy groups. She held evening 'self-knowledge' groups of six to eight people who were free to attend individual sessions without being asked to make a commitment for a set number of sessions. Participants reported that Cecily managed the group dynamics well and appeared unfazed by outbursts of anger from someone in a group. She did not become too close to them as she did not want to be seen as a surrogate mother. Former clients reported that Cecily believed in them; this was important to those who felt that no other close adult did.

Throughout the 1980s, in addition to private clients and some referrals from a local general practitioner, Cecily was retained by solicitors or individuals to provide expert reports to present to courts to support a party's position. Her forensic services covered civil, criminal and family law matters. She also attended professional conferences and seminars and participated in weekend retreats.

In February 1984, Cecily became a member of the Australian Psychological Society and the Institute of Clinical Psychologists, the two relevant professional bodies in Australia. She became a founding and life member of the Canberra chapter of the Australian Clinical Psychology Association. Not that she had any enthusiasm for institutional activities, as such; what she enjoyed most was the actual work of counselling and reading in the field. She was also instrumental in establishing the ACT Jungian Society, which held its inaugural meeting in 1984. In June that year, Cecily gave the first public lecture of the new society, speaking on 'The Essence of Jung's Psychology'.

In 1985, in pursuit of the benefits of dream analysis, Cecily established a weekly Dream Group that she led free of charge. By 1987, places in her weekly lunchtime group were filled with a core group of about five regular attendees and others who came and went. They brought their own lunch and Cecily provided tea and coffee. People put in \$2 or other small change with the proceeds to be given to the Jungian Society. In private, Cecily affectionately called the group participants her 'dream boats'. Her role as group leader was to get the group to engage with each other, gain insights and become more reflective of their own lives. She encouraged the participants to keep a dream diary so that they could discuss each other's dreams and reflect on them. From her own understanding of the literature, she also told her dream boats what symbols in dreams might mean. She sometimes shared her own dreams with the group for their analysis. One woman, I will call her Sue, recalls one where Cecily was near a murky pool with unpleasant things in it, and she was nervous about going into it. Sue believed there must be something troubling Cecily. She suggested that Cecily privately visualise 'getting into the water'. Cecily did that and reported back to Sue that it had helped her deal with a troubling issue. Cecily gave a little of herself in this way and, while she did befriend some of her dream boats, she maintained a professional distance.

In 1986, Cecily obtained a certificate in Myers–Briggs Personality Types, to help with her understanding of people and how best to relate to them. She gained 'great sustenance' from the local Jungian Society,

giving lectures, and arranging or running one-day workshops. On one workshop on 'active imagination', for example, she asked participants to bring crayons and drawing paper to help them better understand the work and principles of Jung. She reviewed Jung's *Answer to Job* for the society newsletter in which she explained that the gist of the work was concerned with the inadequacy of traditional Christianity to cope with the problems of today; a message with which, surely, John would have agreed.<sup>1</sup>

In 1987, Cecily was made the first life member of the local Jungian Society, in recognition of her contribution to the founding and running of the society. At the end of the year, Cecily and Robert hosted the Jungian Society Christmas Party. It was 'a soiree filled with such excellence, that its reputation deserves to be spread to the four corners', psychologist Caroline Rolls reported in the chapter's next newsletter. Each of the 20 or so members brought a plate of food to share that became a 'feast of tastes'. Between courses, a soprano member of the group sang songs accompanied by Robert at the piano and another person on the flute. Skits of Jung and Pooh Bear portrayed a 'mystical encounter' that dealt with the inner journey of life, and there was a presentation of a 'chance meeting' between the four functions: thinking, feeling, intuition and sensation. The audience's task was to guess at the identities.

Cecily became known in Canberra for her interest in the psychology of Jung in her private practice work and became so busy that she considered not advertising her service and rationing the time she spent with each client. She became a role model for young psychologists. Retired clinical psychologist and director of the Canberra Marriage Counselling Service from 1981 to 1988 – now Relationships Australia – Dr Malise Arnstein attests to this. Arnstein regarded Cecily's peers, Margaret Evans and Leila Bailey, as the 'Grandes Dames' of clinical psychology in Canberra, and Cecily, specialising in Jungian psychotherapy, was the third 'Grande Dame' in this respect.<sup>2</sup>

Absorbed in her work, Cecily became less inclined to accompany Robert on trips overseas that he so enjoyed. He had friends and relatives he liked to visit and lamented that they might not meet Cecily. 'The chance of Cecily travelling gets increasingly remote – she feels the need so little and is so absorbed in her practice ... So, you'll have to come here to meet

1 C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job* (London: Routledge, 1955).

2 Personal communication, 10 September 2018.

her ...', he wrote to Canadian friends.<sup>3</sup> Cecily had found her purpose in life – to work with people to try and improve their lives – and she rarely travelled with Robert from that time on.

Cecily's purpose in life included us – improving her own family's lives and relationships – although she felt she was failing to improve her own. While John was mostly absent through our adult lives, Cecily was always there to give us, and her grandchildren, wise counselling. Our mother was the silver thread that bound our family together through our adventures and adversities, the family's emotional hub; the family matriarch.

There were always issues on which we sought her help. She was quiet and reserved and, at the same time, confident and self-contained. Because she appeared to be complete, wise, self-aware and accepting and non-judgemental of others, we had little understanding of her inner turmoil, which she shared with few others. We 'dumped' our issues on her and nothing we told her seemed to surprise her. One of her clients described her as 'unflappable'. It is clear to us, now, that we drew on Cecily excessively to support us in our self-focused lives. We clearly overwhelmed Cecily – or I at least did – with our outpouring of goings-on in our lives. If only we daughters had understood her needs and loaded on her fewer of ours!



**Three sisters, Meredith, Clare and Pam, Canberra, 1995.**

Source: Family collection.

3 R. S. Parker papers, NLA, MS 8200, box 40, file 184, 'General Correspondence, letters to Percy and Virginia Black', 7 June 1984 and 29 November 1985.

Meredith, Clare and I were all intense about our various fields of work. We bewildered our children by our overly busy and ambitious lives. We all worked in areas in which we believed we could achieve social change to benefit the disadvantaged and women in particular. John's philosophy was that 'you shouldn't have to work; you should only want to work', and want to work we did. Clare declared that we were born with a Methodist work ethic and Meredith and I agreed with her – it came from both parents.

Cecily's love of people and interest in them for whoever they were did not prevent her from having views, as did John, on who might make suitable partners for us. By way of background, John had frowned on Meredith dating 'cordies' (Duntroon military cadets) and was angry about Clare seeing her young German 'boy-next-door' friend, while Cecily discouraged me from wanting to marry a carpenter and, before I married my first husband Dan, questioned whether I would be happy living with someone who was 'just a teacher'.<sup>4</sup> As it happened, all three of us married men from working-class backgrounds who were intent on completing higher education. All three of us saw our husbands through their doctorates. Meredith and Clare, in time, went on to complete their own PhDs and my then husband Dan supported me through my master's studies in law. John, having always stressed the importance of us having the education to be self-reliant, proved right in that regard, as we all achieved careers that allowed us to be financially independent. We three needed them, as none of our marriages survived the test of time.

Our marriage breakups, understandably but sadly, impacted on our children. Cecily developed especially close relationships with her grandchildren, connecting with them through books, outings to galleries and concerts, intimate conversations and letters. She encouraged them to talk openly with her, about our parenting or any other issues. All our children developed into sensitive and insightful adults because of, or despite, our parenting and hopefully not our neglect. A good deal of credit for that outcome goes to Cecily.

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4 Dan Coward and I married in 1968. He obtained a doctorate in history. He is now Dan Huon and living in Tasmania.



This text is taken from *Persons of Interest: An Intimate Account of Cecily and John Burton*, by Pamela Burton with Meredith Edwards, published 2022,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/PI.2022.36](https://doi.org/10.22459/PI.2022.36)