

'Crossing the River' – a tribute to Peter Gilbert

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our gathering today marks the culmination of a project to mark a life of someone totally committed to seeing the best in human endeavour. My first encounter with Peter was at Worth Abbey for one of the residentials which he conducted for Senior Managers in Mental Health Services. With other colleagues I came burdened with worries about budgets, meeting targets, and all the myriad problems which go with management in the NHS today.

I got to know Peter as a mentor for myself and others as we embarked on some of these challenging tasks. I came to value his wisdom and advice – for many of us he was more than just a mentor – he was – and I use the word freely – a 'guru' in every sense. So as we mark his remarkable life through the publication of the book today, what can we reflect on in terms of his unique qualities ?

First and foremost, Peter was an optimist. He helped us to see the essential goodness of the human services endeavour at times when cynicism and poor morale tempted us to see the world around us through a negative prism. Peter challenged us to see ourselves and those for whom we are responsible as agents of change for the better - he helped us to see that humanity is capable of great things if we allow those instincts which help us to transcend ourselves to come to the fore.

But his optimism was matched by a focus on the real issues facing social and health and social care – the crisis in Mid Staffordshire's health care was an example of how he constantly strived to match his philosophy to real situations. With his charming but persuasive manner Peter had an uncanny ability to get to the heart of an issue in a way that made us all focus on the questions which really mattered – and to facilitate the process of finding practical solutions. His inclusive approach in so many groups which he facilitated meant that the person who was the least vocal but who had the most useful contribution to make was listened to with respect and courtesy. He encouraged many of us who would not have dreamt of being an author to try our hand.

Secondly, it is worth reflecting on what was it about Peter that made him such a popular teacher, speaker and contributor to the numerous events at which he contributed. What was it that provided that renewal of sense of purpose and commitment for all of who came into contact with him ? I believe that the clue is in the title of the book we are celebrating today – 'Crossing the River'. Rivers have for the most part to be crossed by bridges – and Peter was an inveterate bridge builder. He was deeply engaged in the four themes of the book to which Arthur will refer. He not only built bridges between the communities of interest represented in these themes, but within them as well.

His work on leadership, nurtured by the Benedictine tradition and the lifelong influence of Worth Abbey, helped to bring a focus on the need for humanity in effective leaders in contrast to the 'macho' tradition of leadership in human services which has dominated our health and social services for so long. Peter saw leadership in ways which equated to his view of the functioning of his running club to which he was so attached and which is described in the book – sometimes the leader is at the front – often the leader is alongside the runners, as well as bringing up the rear in encouraging the stragglers. His insights into the 'soul' of organisations provided a fresh and stimulating approach to looking at organisational behaviour.

Peter crossed many other rivers in the course of his teaching and development work which was cut short so tragically by his illness. His approach to interfaith relations was rooted not just in understanding the dimension of faith as it touches our humanity but in practical concerns as well. I remember well a seminar which he chaired on different faith perspectives in dementia at the Gurdwara in Birmingham – and my slight discomfort when he turned to me and said 'Well Ben, so what does Christianity say about dementia' ?...

His concern about the importance of the spiritual perspective in mental health was translated into the influence he brought to bear in NIMHE and other forums in persuading key stakeholders that this is an agenda which has to be taken seriously. It is perhaps fitting that his final book was based on the spiritual contribution to end of life care. Peter never shied away from confronting the core question – is death a closed door or a gateway to another life ? His own faith was profound and, I am sure, an inspiration to Sue and his family and all those close to him.

There is so much more that can be said about Peter and his legacy to us and the organisations in which he played such a major role – the National Spirituality and Mental Health Forum, the Social Care Strategic Network, the National Development Team, not forgetting his running club, to name just a few. He gave us the confidence to dare to think that we could 'humanise' health and social care and to counter the all too frequent reductive tendencies in the delivery of health and social care. He liked to remind us of Bauman's expression "*The new individualism, the fading of human bonds and the wilting of solidarity*" (Bauman, 2006¹).

Peter never ceased to remind us of the importance of crossing the rivers which confront us in our personal and professional lives. He has taken his own journey across the river. We who have been so touched by his life and work owe it to him to take forward his legacy for the good of all the vulnerable and wounded people whom we meet in our daily lives and for whom Peter was so concerned.

Ben Bano

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¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid fear*, Cambridge: Polity Press. (2006)