



Obituary

Lynn Hoffman: family therapy's gift

Harlene Anderson

In the foreword to *Foundations of family therapy*, Donald Bloch aptly captured Lynn Hoffman's inquisitive nature, distinctive respectfulness, and word mastery: 'She has a curious and beneficent eye, a mode of inquiry that asks not only, "What is going on here?" but "What is going on here that is good?" ... she is highly accurate in her selection of their [those she writes about] essential ideas and, where personal description is called for, a word painter with a complex palette that she uses well.'

With a degree in English literature and a summa cum laude pedigree, Lynn Hoffman began her career reading unsolicited manuscripts at a publishing house and later did freelance editing. In 1963, finding herself in California and feeling professionally alone and drifting, a friend serendipitously introduced her to Virginia Satir at the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto. Satir was looking for someone to edit her book *Conjoint family therapy*. I wonder if Virginia Satir knew when she engaged Lynn and her editing pen that she was letting a genie out of a bottle, one who would become the ingenious historian and intuitive foreteller of family therapy. What a gift.

The editing job piqued Lynn's curiosity about the past and current research projects at MRI and opened the door for her dynamic and fruitful connections with the MRI giants. My colleague Harry Goolishian would say that Lynn was lucky, meaning she noticed an opportunity and went for it. She was a colleague and friend of many of the founding fathers and mothers of family therapy. Although she was quite fortunate to have first-hand knowledge of these seminal thinkers and their ideas and work she was never a name dropper.

Often thought of as a historian and chronicler of family therapy, one could say Lynn was a researcher as well, though she never described herself, or was thought of by others, as such. Using her tools – her curiosity, her keen eyes and ears, her relationships, and

her epistemological lens – and taking copious detailed notes, over the years she wrote about her conversations with and observations of the early and later innovators in family therapy. In the margins of her notes, she wrote her reflections and interpretations of these experiences. She wove it all together to provide eloquently, engagingly, and informatively a glimpse of the people she studied as persons, and importantly, describing the nuances of what they did, not what they thought and said that they did.

Foundations of family therapy: a conceptual framework for systems change spotlighted Lynn's gift to family therapy and opened the door for her to become an integral member of the leaders in family therapy. Unlike many books on family therapy, she did not write a collection of chapters that detailed techniques of the then current schools of family therapy. Instead, in her engaging storytelling and conversational writing style, she elucidated and synthesized an informative and illuminating description of the essence of the development of the concepts of family therapy. Drawing from knowing and working alongside most of family therapy's seminal thinkers, Lynn used her personal experiences and familiarity with their talents, and portrayed them as human beings. She continued chronicling the ever-emergent innovative paradigms in family therapy in her later book *Family therapy: an intimate history*. She sensed the challenge and significance these developments held for transforming family therapy in particular and psychotherapy in general. Although in her writings and presentations she enthusiastically showcased the emerging developments and newer contributors on the scene, Lynn never disregarded family therapy's roots and founders, nor the legacy of systemic thinkers. Both books mentioned above are must reads for the newer generations of psychotherapists and educators and those who want to contextually situate the development of family therapy and the distinctions therein. In *Foundations* Lynn said she always wanted to be a writer. Indeed, she exceeded her dream, becoming an eloquent writer and wordsmith extraordinaire, drawing pictures with her poetic expressions and metaphors of difficult concepts, making them clearer and accessible to us.

Lynn became one the world's best-known family therapists, gaining an international presence and influence; she was a sought-after speaker and presenter. Lynn gained great respect for her sense of the challenges our contemporary world was facing and how family therapists could respond to these. As well, there was a growing acknowledgement and appreciation for her conceptual and clinical

contributions over the years, and the creative metaphors she used, such as ‘rolling conversations’, the ‘thing in the bushes’, the ‘presenting edge’, ‘connected speaking’, and ‘dilemma at crossroads’, to bring life and clarity to difficult concepts.

An avid reader, she studied the contributions of those influenced by an umbrella framework of social construction-postmodern related assumptions, including theorists such as Bakhtin, Kenneth Gergen, Merleau-Ponty, Donald Schon, John Shotter, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Thought-provoking articles on cultural, scientific, and social innovations and commentaries would catch her eye, and she often cited them in her writings. Intellectually curious, Lynn found herself a kindred spirit with those therapists and scholars who were distancing themselves from, or moving beyond, the traditions and boundaries of family therapy. She discovered camaraderie and identity within a community of collaborative and dialogically oriented (though Lynn preferred the word conversational) practitioners. This preference reflects, I think, Lynn’s naturalness, openness, and humility. She was a role model for women and encouraged both women and men; she had a gender sensitivity and a willingness to challenge and digress from social and cultural norms, and hierarchical therapy conventions. She always acknowledged others’ influence on her ideas and practice, and always wrote respectfully about others, whether she agreed with them or not.

In closing, I am grateful and honoured by the invitation of the *Journal* to share some words about Lynn, and especially to be in the company of Imelda McCarthy, one of Lynn’s admired and appreciated friends and colleagues. Lynn will remain a gift for family therapy, what it has been, is, and will become. Those of us she touched hope we can continue, each in our own way, to create paths forward, while at the same time uphold respect for the legacies and torches Lynn and others have left us.