

IN MEMORIAM

Pierre Dominicé (1938-2024)

Pierre Dominicé's Biographical Gifts

Linden West

Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

Pierre Dominicé's life was redolent with inspiration, energy, dedication, alongside struggle, anxiety and quest. It offers us - students, colleagues in Geneva and a wider world, me included - an abundance of gifts. Gifts matter as French feminist philosopher Helene Cixous has written for a vibrant ecology of learning. Cixous says of the good writer that "she involves her story in history (...) using poetry, fiction, and the theoretical idea of the gift in a feminine economy" (compared with the masculine economy of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's 'capital'). Gifts bring superior possibilities, she insists, including in adult learning; "the genuine gift is admissible...because of the ability of women to accept and accommodate the other, libidinally and reproductively, without violence" (cited in Chapman Hoult, 2012).

The above, I suggest, is also true of men like Pierre Dominicé: symbolically the feminine and masculine can be integrated in processes of eclectically inspired lifelong learning and of what Jung called individuation. Learning eclectically about feeling as well as mind, body as well as spirit; accepting a kind of negative capability - a capacity to live in doubt as well as uncertainty without grabbing at facts and resisting the fundamentalisms of some contemporary religion. But also finding symbolic truth in aspects of the Christian eucharist, the bible and images of the cross.

History is also central to biography: we are inevitably creatures of our times. Times, in large part for Pierre and others, when conventional forms of religion struggled to be heard, or are arrogant in their fundamentalism. Times when the liberal spirit in adult or higher

education gets marginalised under the mantras of economic deities and the business university. And times where biographical work became an existential necessity as inherited templates fracture, and we are forced, like it or not, to compose lives on more of our own terms. Times too of deepening anxiety about climate crisis, wealth inequality, conspicuous consumption and febrile worship of Mammon. And of war, and crises of democratic life and mental health. Here is the context in which Pierre Dominicé lived his life and struggled for wisdom. In his struggle, we can find profound gifts.

It might seem strange evoking Cixous when I think of Pierre, a year or more after his death. But the idea of his life as gift is strong: the gift of his teaching, of his spiritual and religious quest, and of his biographical approach to adult education, codified in his book *Learning from our lives* (Dominicé, 2000). The book was an inspiration in my own work, and an inspiration for students across Europe, and a wider world, thanks to his important role in the francophone 'L' 'Association Internationale des histoires de vie en formation et de recherche biographique en education' (ASIHVIF) and the 'European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) Life History and Biography Network', over many years. As I write in this moment, I also recall the gift of talking to him just before he died: in a Maison de Retraite, near Geneva, in the company of his former student, who became a dear colleague to us both, Michel Alhadeff-Jones. Michel had been anxious that I visit Pierre knowing of my admiration for him and also recognising just how ill he was. It was a final time to be together before his death (I'd done a Workshop for Michel in life history and professional experience, immediately before, at the University of Freiburg, in Switzerland).

Pierre invited us into his lovely room in the Maison de Retraite, with a stunning view of a river and mountains. We sat and mused, and I noticed an open edition of the Psalms on the table near his bed. I read them too, I think I said, admiring their vibrancy, joy and suffering as 'wisdom literature'. He nodded. 'The spiritual life is crucial', he said. 'Yes', I agreed, but why then, I asked, in our work together in the ESREA Network over so many years, did we give so little attention to it? Pierre shrugged and said that 'it was not the done thing in the academy'. I realised how we both sought to reconcile a good and liberal spiritual life with the religious inspiration of our youth and the largely secular, technicist and scientific naturalism of the academy. Getting older gave some of this greater urgency, for both of us.

Pierre demonstrated in *Learning from our lives* how to nurture oral testimony – around, for instance, significant experience and or problems in a student’s professional life – over time, and in dialogue, and then to weave it creatively and analytically into forms of imaginative, reflexive writing. Students worked in supportive groups, shaped by groundrules emphasising the importance of time and space for self and the other, for non-judgementalism, the narrative imagination, generosity of spirit as well as dialogue. Pierre and colleagues offered rich theoretical resources, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur, Gaston Pineau and Christine Delory-Momberger, among others. Gradually, students learned to deepen their story as the world of ideas encountered lived experience in a dialogical community. An iterative process connected inner life and meaning with professional concerns and a wider literature. A quest to move beyond fragments of experience, and to find more of a whole, a gestalt, to guide professional and personal life. And to find more self-recognition and acceptance in the process too, in a community of learners. These hermeneutics have shaped my own work among generations of Masters and Doctoral students, and in the Middle East, when working with Jewish Israeli and Palestinian educators.

Giving time to the personal and historical – even when time is scarce – and for storytelling. In Geneva, and Canterbury, among other places, narrative risks were encouraged and shared reflexivity cultivated. And learning to write imaginally in the potential poetics of history and self was deemed essential, encompassing messy, mysterious, obscure, and ethically challenging as well as beautiful, even sacred moments. That sums up one aspect of Pierre’s gift to us all.

Pierre, I should mention, was raised in a Protestant Genevan family and studied theology at University before working in university adult education. I realise now how we shared a common quest, through reading his last book *Au risque de se dire* (Dominicé, 2015). The book was written on his retirement and is an expression of frustration about what is difficult, sometimes impossible to say in the academy: about the importance of inner meaning, stillness, the symbolic and learning from the other in a turbulent culture, where people have become more frightened of one another. And how the academy can make this difficult in its deification of disembodied theory.

Pierre sought an ecumenical, dialogical, cosmopolitan solution to faith in a globalised world: in the company of diverse friends from the Taizé

community, where simple, meditative chants support prayer and silence and the search for reconciliation across diverse traditions. Among spiritual friends too in Buddhism, and in experiencing the Catholic eucharist at the 'Foyer Cistercian de soeurs'. Pierre's was a never complete quest for truth, dialogue and meaning. It was an unfinished attempt to reconcile some earlier religious grounding with diverse spiritual perspectives, within a secularised academy culturally 'allergic' to Christianity. Peter Alheit, the distinguished sociologist, who also played a leadership role in the ESREA Network, reminded me, on Pierre's death, that both he and Pierre had been Protestant Pastors. What emerges now, as I read Pierre's writing, is a kind of challenge to the conventional antagonism between 'academic knowledge' and 'religion', or at least spirituality in the struggle to build the good society in a globalised world. Both/and, not either/or.

We need, as Pierre saw it, to ground ourselves biographically, in a cosmopolitan openness to 'alterity', to better understand the depths, exhilaration and occasional failure of our own and others' learning lives. And, in fact, doing biography and generating meaning is itself, at times, profoundly spiritual. But the academy is often dazzled by the spell of quantification, scientific naturalism or theoretical performance, relegating inner life and the search for meaning to its margins. Work of this kind struggles for legitimacy and space.

And to return to the Psalms and symbolism. Pierre writes of these, in *Au risque de se dire*, and his beliefs, as embodying a form of 'dissidence'. Of personal rapport with God, through which a dialogical spirit lived in relation to the Psalms. Here is writing embodying a mix of gratitude, recognition, acknowledgement, revolt, joy and suffering, he wrote, where he feels in dialogue with the Psalmists as well as God. But this requires silence and stillness too, which takes time and effort if the text is to become alive and intelligible. Pierre however does not seek certitude or crave membership of groups. Rather he celebrates difference, and the importance of engaging with others' diverse interpretations on matters that are both clear and obscure. He finds arrogance in the certainties of ecclesiastical hierarchies that get in the way of such a living, learning faith. He finds powerful illumination in the symbolism of the cross: in terrible abandonment alongside resurrection; as well as in the eucharist's bread and wine, and the feeling of being fed and sustained. This is enough, he writes, to sustain him in his dissident pilgrimage.

He/we might also hear a call from the Cosmos to work to make things more conscious, in beautiful ways. Bach's *St Mathew's passion* is a case in point, as is the making of the good learning life. It is something sacred. Pierre's life was spent experiencing and illuminating the interplay of auto/biography, mythos and logos, youth and age, health and illness, science and religion, the material and spiritual, learning and resistance in a dissident but also loving way. Pierre's spirituality lies in holding on to some religious roots – eucharistic and biblical – while accepting the difficulty of explaining or justifying them in the academy, and a globalised world. But via ritual, symbolism, and the crucial work of dialogue, across difference, we can progress. Pierre is deeply perplexed at where the world is heading, as many of us are – pedagogically, epistemologically, culturally, ecologically and spiritually – but in facing this and dialoguing, spiritually, with diverse seekers, in the Psalms and here and now – passionately, eloquently, always respectfully – Pierre offers perhaps his last and greatest gift.

References

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