

## **A Big Presence even in her Absence**

**Madelaine Ann Fish (Della)**  
**27<sup>th</sup> July 1943 - 13<sup>th</sup> August 2022**

My dear friend and colleague Madelaine Ann Fish (Della) died peacefully at home on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2022. She leaves an enormous gap. She lived a full life and was always true to her principles. Talented and brave she encouraged us to live well and to see the world, practically and philosophically in new ways. Her professional ideas were firmly grounded in her belief that 'educational questions are not to be answered but addressed!'. Her personal credo for her ideals in education was:

*I have pioneered the ideas about education in the moral mode of practice for postgraduate medicine (see Fish, 2012). In that publication I also argued for a virtues-based curriculum for doctors (as opposed to a competencies one) and suggested that it should be based on the ideas of Aristotle and the Thomist explication of Christianity, which I have found to be commonly accepted across the mono-theistic religions, the work of other spiritual thinkers and generally in civilized societies. Our shared philosophy may be seen at <https://www.ed4medprac.co.uk/>*

Her avowed mission was to explore and improve the practice of education *in practice*. She ventured and did just that across many fields in teacher education, healthcare generally and in postgraduate medicine most particularly. Her depth and breadth of knowledge in English literature, history, education, religion and healthcare combined with her courage, energy and fierce determination, will be hard to match. Our unique collaboration as educator and surgeon has forged many important ways of seeing both the importance of good teachers and the quality of supervision in medical practice as fundamental to the quality of the best patient care.

Della was born in Southampton in 1943, a war baby and one originally of a set of twins. Her sibling was lost during the pregnancy, so she was brought up as the only child of Lesley and Winnifred Fish, a headmaster and an academic. She had no doubts about following in their footsteps - once she had come to terms with the unsuitability of her childhood ambition to be a professional ice-skater! Following secondary education at the grammar school, she completed an English degree at the University of Swansea followed by a PGCE. Interestingly Della was a student teacher in Mynyddbach Comprehensive School in Swansea as I was head girl. We never met at that time.

### **Marlborough Grammar School.**

Her first teaching position was as a secondary school English teacher in Marlborough Grammar School, moving into teacher education, first as a lecturer at Hereford College of Education. Whilst a senior lecturer at Hereford Training College she was a regular attender at the Cathedral and was a key contributor to a music and dance festival performed by school pupils and staff to celebrate the cathedral's history. By this time she had completed two Master's degrees, an MA from Swansea University on the poetry of George Herbert and a second in curriculum design at the University of Exeter under the guidance of Professor Mike Golby. When the college was closed in the early eighties she completed a PhD on the

poetry of John Donne at the University of Birmingham. This paved the way for her to join the West London Institute as senior lecturer in the early 1980s.

### **West London Institute (now Brunel University)**

At the West London Institute, she was known as a fierce but highly supportive teacher and colleague. She introduced novel ways of teaching and learning for student teachers. Always challenging ingrained habits (and not always endearing herself too those in charge) she was courageous in pushing students and staff to step 'out of their comfort zone' to stimulate their thinking and their teaching. This continued to be a key theme of her practice as an educator. Those she worked with on the ground remember her with affection and loyalty as many tributes following her death have attested.

Della enjoyed an interesting time at the West London Institute and forged a career that stretched beyond teacher education to include healthcare organisations particularly nursing and physiotherapy. At that time she suffered her first cancer diagnosis and underwent surgery and radiotherapy for carcinoma of the uterus. She made a good recovery. In the early 1990s the development and implementation of the national curriculum for schools was taking hold. She found the stultifying nature of this approach intolerable and soon decided to go her own way. She resigned in 1995 and spent the next year following her passion of painting. She was drawing and painting until several weeks before her death. Many of her paintings can be viewed on *The Della Fish Foundation* website, a charity started in her memory and aiming to continue to promote her educational ideas through teacher development and research particularly in postgraduate medical education.

### **Life after the West London Institute**

The indulgence of developing her painting skills was soon to be overtaken by many requests across physiotherapy, occupational therapy and nursing for her to run courses on her educational ideas. So began the next phase of her career as an independent educational consultant. She was never short of work and began writing books. Her early writings are still highly relevant to current healthcare education. Many of her books can be seen at <https://www.ed4medprac.co.uk/>

### **British Acupuncture Accreditation Board**

She was appointed by Lord Edward Baldwin, chairman of the Board, as education officer for the British Acupuncture Accreditation Board in the 1990s and served in that capacity for five fruitful years. Working with Lord Baldwin, she successfully laid the foundations and standards for taking the education and training of those who wished to practise Acupuncture in the UK, into university education. Prior to this, schools for acupuncture were private institutions and unregulated.

### **Poland**

Della was invited to be part of an international team working in Poland on a programme led by Bob Jeffery and Jan Potworowski of Brunel University. The programme was aimed at the reform and development of the Polish School Education System in preparation for Poland's entry into the European Union.

The team worked with groups of Polish teachers and academics on ways in which the Curriculum for Teacher Education might change as old Communist systems were abandoned. Some of the Polish group had already read some of Della's writing. All were excited by the new ideas – so different from those that had been promoted under the Soviet regime. However, many of them displayed a degree of shock when they discovered that the beliefs, values and theories under consideration were not simply matters for intellectual discussion and debate, but a foundation for personal action. Typical comments were “this is wonderful, it is inspiring, - but of course, it won't work in Poland”. Well, it does now!

### **Kent, Surrey, Sussex Deanery**

Della was appointed an education consultant at Kent, Surrey, Sussex (Postgraduate Medical Education: PGME) Deanery by Professor Zöe Playdon, another luminary in the land of PGME. In this role she taught Consultants in seminars and individually in clinical settings as they worked with their Juniors, and where she was centrally involved in the design of a master's degree in education for consultants in medical practice. She was closely involved with piloting the new Foundation Year. This experience which went on for about eight years gave her an excellent grounding and understanding of the life of practising doctors in everyday clinical practice.

### **Kings College, University of Swansea, Charles Sturt University, Sydney, Australia and The University of Chester**

Della held visiting Professorships at each of these universities. She developed Masters' programmes at the British institutions and in Sydney worked, wrote and taught extensively with Professor Joy Higgs. All of her writing explored her ideas and understanding of practice and she brought to that work her experience and her interpretation of the work of other educators. Her interpretations have been much appreciated by doctors undertaking master's degrees as it helped them through the often alien words of academic educators.

Whilst I was still in full-time surgical practice, Della and I created the MA in Education for Postgraduate Medical Practice at the University of Chester. This was a novel programme whose aim was to take cohorts of senior clinicians through a Master's pathway where they learned about education in the moral mode of practice and began challenging and usually changing the way they taught and engaged with their learners. The idea was that a critical mass of clinicians in one institution were needed in order to develop better educational understanding leading to improved educational provision in their institutions. To this day the transformation in thinking amongst these doctors continues to influence their professional lives.

### **Educational Advisor to The Royal College of Surgeons of England**

Much of Della's time between 2002 and 2004 was as the key educational advisor to the Royal College of Surgeons of England. She and I, together with a team of surgeons, led the design and development of a new curriculum for Senior House Officers in surgery. The General Professional Practice of Surgery Curriculum (GPPS) was piloted in two Deaneries in England with important findings. Papers in several journals, including the Annals of the College record these findings. Many found her ability to critique with authority,

exasperating. Although she often expressed frustration, Della would not compromise, but persevered, slowly, in her words, “like tickling trout”. A phrase so useful in taking folk to new ways of seeing the world of education.

### **Ed4Medprac and Aneumi Publications**

Meeting Della in 2001 began a personal and a professional friendship which lasted to her death. We forged a great respect for each other’s knowledge and expertise and together created a unique partnership of surgeon and educator determined to try and improve postgraduate medical education. We engaged in teaching and designing programmes at university and together we published our first book, *Cultivating a Thinking Surgeon* in 2005. We set up Ed4medprac Ltd as a means of developing our work and this also became a means of publishing our books. The website of the company contains many useful resources and information about our publications. The Aneumi is a cartoon of a neurone which we have used as prompt about what transformative education ought to be doing...developing ‘a new me’! The company will go on to support *The Della Fish Foundation* which will begin to offer later in 2024, grants for teacher development and research in medical education.

### **Life in Cranham**

Linda, Della and Evelyn set up home together in Cranham Gloucestershire in 2007. The home has been a hub for a rich life for all and the welcoming of many guests and friends. Della was a loved and respected member of the community in Cranham, and active in the church, where she worshiped regularly until she became less mobile. Our last book, *Transformative Reflection for practicing physicians and surgeons (2020)*, was written just after the diagnosis of her final illness and during COVID shut down and was dedicated to her carers who played a key part in helping her recover her mobility enough to write and paint. She is sorely missed by us all.

Linda de Cossart  
Cranham, March 2024