

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

Obituary: Michael Edwards (1930-2010)

Penelope Hall

Michael Edwards was born on 2 November 1930, near Epping Forest, on the eastern outskirts of London and he died on 13 March 2010, in Falmouth, Cornwall. Between those dates and places there stretched a long and active life encompassing a distinguished career as Art Therapist and Jungian Analyst.

As therapist, teacher and lecturer, supervisor, colleague and friend he touched many lives and his constant presence, although not always visible on the political front line, has had a formative influence on the development of art therapy, not only in the UK but also further afield. He was a founder member of the British Association of Art Therapists in 1964 and its Chairman from 1971-75. He was also known for his lifelong devotion to traditional jazz.

One aspect that may spring vividly to mind and that can be acknowledged to have made him unusual and special, both to individuals and more generally in our shared world of art therapy, was the scope, depth and richness of his relationship to images, in particular those encountered in art and dream. His talent in this area of psyche was conveyed through his writing, could be experienced in his workshops and lectures and naturally, felt most personally in the context of individual therapy. Though no doubt always present within him and inborn, it can be understood that these abilities were honed and intensified through his life experience.

Long before there was any thought of art therapy there, or indeed anywhere else in the UK, Michael studied painting at St Albans School of Art. It was after

National Service in the RAF and a short spell teaching at Lancing College, that he made what was to prove a seminal move. Following a successful visit to the Withymead Centre in Devon, Irene Champernowne, its founder, invited him to join her therapeutic community, where a group of artists and therapists, together with people in fragile mental health, or in states of downright breakdown lived out Jungian ideals based on a firm belief in the healing power of the visual and expressive arts and music and therapy. Michael recounted that considerable successes were achieved and that he found it to be an immensely stimulating environment, obliquely noting that this was long before the tyranny of 'risk assessments' and 'health and safety at work'. Irene Champernowne herself had studied with Jung and his associates in Zurich and encouraged her protégés, of whom Michael was one, to follow her example. Although it was many years before Michael, who had family commitments and no private income, was to realize this ambition, his time at Withymead had laid the basis of his subsequent practice. He had experienced the conjunction of art and therapy and had seen living evidence that it worked.

Meanwhile, after leaving Withymead he taught at Dartington College near Totnes and worked for a while in London before setting up the art therapy training in Birmingham in 1969. This began as an adjunct to a teachers training course, but later included a Masters degree. Some years later he went on to introduce an art therapy training in Canada, at Concordia University, Montreal. Rising to a certain eminence in his career, he was made Professor Emeritus on his departure. It was from here that he began to travel regularly to Zurich, as he was then able to undertake training as an analyst at the C G Jung Institute.

Each summer, however he returned to England for the Champernowne Trust Summer Course (at first as a workshop leader and lecturer and later as the course Director, from which he retired in 2005). The summer course at Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park, was intended to keep the spirit of Withymead, which had closed, alive and to introduce it to new generations. Every year its participants included trainee, as well as practicing arts therapists.

As well as following the course of study of Analytical Psychology at the Institute, Michael had been given the privileged, though sometimes arduous job of

recording and curating the collection of art work made by Jung's patients which was housed there. He had access to this unique material and was able to use it for lectures, then through the now old fashioned medium of a slide show (since transferred, I was assured to DVD). Present in 1982 on one such occasion and subsequently at many others, in common with many other people I have found exposure to these mysterious art works (there were no contemporary notes to give guidance) and Michael's attentive and open ended attitude to them and commentary, to be a memorable experience. I subsequently found many of Michael's lectures evocative and stimulating. They could at times be impressionistic in character, maybe including snatches of Jazz, provided by him on trumpet, or tape; this was strangely in contrast to his writing and his own art work, both of which I found to be meticulous and carefully crafted.

On his return to England as a fully-fledged analyst, Michael's private practice was split, for some years, between London and Exeter and he later divided his time between London, Truro and Falmouth. He had an active role in the art therapy training field, involved in assessing students and courses and delivering lectures and workshops all over the country. At this time he also revisited Canada and travelled in Australia. Finally settling in Falmouth he formed a jazz band, composed of other lively and talented veteran enthusiasts. A further contribution to the art therapy literature was the chapter of a book, this time in association with his daughter Claire, an established Australian art therapist. In the south west he gave inexhaustible support to several unsuccessful attempts set up an art therapy qualifying course in, at different times, Falmouth, Plymouth and Exeter, finally having to be content with foundation course level activities in Exeter and Truro. He continued his private practice from home as his travels to other parts became less frequent. I believe that his last formal lecture was delivered at one of the Exeter Conferences. He was a much valued, though infrequent, participant at BAAT Region 1 meetings, gradually relinquishing these activities as his health failed.

That he was a man who had the capacity to inspire loyalty and affection for his qualities of kindness, tolerance and humour and for the quiet strength that allowed ambivalence and the stressful opposites, that are the stuff of real life, to

be held in ways that feel safe, but not tame, is borne out by the response to the news of his death. The spread of information was reminiscent of the way that an ink line drawn on wet paper gives rise to many branches and vein-like circuitous channels that travel out in all directions and shows that throughout his life people had been affected by him, some profoundly and in life changing ways

Very much his own person, Michael seemed to follow his own path unswervingly. Occasional encounters were possible with attributes of the 'slippery and mercurial' qualities of mind with which he proudly identified. One can be certain that even of those to whom Jung's ideas do not appeal or who, for other reasons were not drawn to his introverted and intuitive character, many will join the majority of us who hold warm memories of the joyful adept of New Orleans jazz, who on many occasions played the trumpet barefoot, or danced with abandon.

Biography

Penelope Hall is an art therapist living in Cornwall with a special interest in mother/child art therapy. She first met Michael Edwards in 1981 at the Champernowne Trust Summer Course.