

Val Crowley

Three reflections from the CAT learning disability special interest group

Phil Clayton, Julie Lloyd, Nicola Murphy

Phil Clayton writes:

I sit thinking about twenty years ago, in London at the annual ACAT conference. The conference is the usual meeting of likeminded people wanting to exchange ideas, learn and listen to each other. The breakout, concurrent sessions are about to take place and Val and Roz King (a psychiatrist and CAT therapist) are waiting to be allocated a space to deliver their presentations about working with people who have learning disabilities. No rooms had been allocated and Roz delivered her presentation in a cloakroom and Val in an annex with boxes, stacks of chairs and other oddments. Val, Roz and I were understandably concerned about the lack of foresight in the planning for the concurrent sessions and Val made a calm and thoughtful comment about the invisibility of people with a learning disability. We looked at each other, bemused and decided from that moment that things had to change. From that moment Val promised to help enable people with learning disabilities to have their voices heard and invited clinicians to join her, and so the CAT learning disabilities special interest group (SIG) was born.

Val hosted and chaired the SIG meetings and in all those meetings, during our debates and seeming isolation, she consistently sat alongside her colleagues and facilitated change for our shared purpose, with the utmost inimitable warmth and yet serious resolve. The consistent goal, always to give others who are marginalised a voice with selflessness and altruism.

Six years ago, Val penned the foreword to the CAT Learning

Disability textbook and reflecting this same theme in the closing paragraph, such was her commitment and tenacity in making a point! This point will not be forgotten and will be a legacy to be carried by those who follow.

Julie Lloyd writes:

Unusually for a scientifically trained clinical psychologist, and despite our teasing, Val believed in astrology. Hence, as Val approached retirement in April 2009, we in the CAT Learning Disability SPIG, decided that a Reformulation of her star sign was needed. The Reciprocal Roles were her birth planets and Procedures were the movement of these heavenly bodies. We were undecided if this should be Greek or Chinese astrology, so we went with both. Val sat there with a patient, embarrassed and pleased smile as we read it to her. Our Star Sign Reformulation described Val's typical Taurus traits as warm hearted and loving, patient and intending to be reliable, but sometimes ending up a bit disorganised. We described her persistence and determination which was why she had got so much done in developing services and CAT for people with learning disabilities and how she was often a person behind so many projects which did not have her name on. Although typical Taurus traits include self-indulgence, in our SPIG our only evidence of this was when she did nice things such as holidays in exotic locations including Patagonia.

Tigers are rebels. Their energy and love of life are stimulating. They seek out adventures, and at certain points in her life, Val had to be very rebellious. Tigers like people, involvement, and dedication to

humanitarian causes. Val chose to act out some of her ideals and the wrongs of a society towards people who could not advocate for themselves. As a pioneer in bringing CAT to people with learning disabilities she had to struggle with many barriers and unthinking prejudices that arose from a position that marked out people with learning disabilities as fundamentally different from neurotypicals. Within ACAT she fought for respect, recognition and to get heard; within learning disability services she fought for a relational understanding of disability. She started the CAT learning disability group because we needed each other; we needed a place where we could be free to explore and develop reasonable adaptations to CAT without being required to defend ourselves.

She was my supervisor starting with my very first case (in which we explored what the RRs were) and continuing from halfway through my practitioner training until I had completed all the cases required to apply for supervision training. She also supervised my CAT staff teamwork and how to teach our two-day CAT learning disability introduction course. Her skill was her superb awareness of my changing zone of proximal development. She also supervised my transition into chairing the CAT LD group after she stopped doing this task, letting me know how what I did felt to her and tracing a developmental path in my chairing actions, (in 'you used to do this but now you do that' comments).

At her funeral I was astonished to meet a current friend whom I had known since we were both teenagers, who had nothing to do with CAT or the caring

professions. It turned out that my friend Lucy had worked with Val at The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (in an earlier career for Val) and that Val had introduced Lucy to a man who had been in Val's husband's class at school, and whom Lucy later married. Val's husband Barry, Lucy and I commented that it was typical of Val that she could reduce the normal 6 degrees of separation down to 1! The last time Val and I met when she could still talk as dementia ravaged, she told me I was her angel. I replied that she was mine, she was my guardian angel. And she always will be.

Nicola Murphy writes:

I (Dr Nicola Murphy) first met Val in September 1999 when I was a Clinical Psychologist in Training and started my placement in the Community Learning Disability team (CLDT) in which Val worked. On the first day I met her she greeted me with a big beaming smile and had such a warmth about her. That epitomised Val as she was a 'people person' and gravitated towards people; as they did to her. This is not surprising as whenever she entered the large, shared, office she lit up the room with her warmth and enthusiasm.

Her enthusiasm for working collaboratively with the clients, parents and carers, and colleagues never waned. On telling ex-colleagues that she had died I have lost count of how many praised her collaborative

working. Numerous psychiatric colleagues have described how helpful she was to specialist registrars on placement talking to them about the Clinical Psychology profession, and CAT. She also worked with her psychiatric and nursing colleagues to develop, and deliver, groups for adults with learning disabilities and psychosis.

When I qualified as a Clinical Psychologist in September 2001, I went back to work part-time in the CLDT. Val said that she wanted to start a CAT supervision group and asked if I would like to join. I did not know that much about the model but jumped at the chance to be supervised by such a knowledgeable and experienced clinician. I was also captivated by her enthusiasm. I was in the supervision group until she retired from the NHS in April 2009. Val has been instrumental in my professional journey as a CAT Practitioner.

Val has also meant a lot of me on a personal level. It was a real honour to work alongside, and be supervised, by Val. She always lit up the room, and being around her was never dull. She never took life too seriously and lived it to the maximum going on wonderful holidays to far flung places and then coming back and telling us all about it. She was well renowned for her absent mindedness, but never took herself too seriously and used to poke fun at herself, making everyone laugh along with, not at, her. Her warmth and

gregarious personality was also reflected in her clothes. She was renowned for always looking so elegant in brightly coloured clothes. She had such a grace about her as her clothes would always match her bags, shoes and jewellery.

When she retired, we were still in touch via the CAT and LD SPIG. Although she no longer worked with people with learning disabilities, she wanted to come along to the group to still act as an advocate for them by guiding others in the group. She also wanted to catch up with the attendees, many of whom had, like me, become her friends. Like I said she was a real 'people person'.

Val encouraged me to go onto CAT practitioner training and after I qualified (in 2001) she again supervised me for a while until her diagnosis of Alzheimer's meant she had to fully retire. I then used to meet up with her for lunch, and then when she deteriorated visited her at home.

I have seen how much Val inspired Psychologists, Cognitive Analytic Therapist, Psychiatrists, Community Nurses and other colleagues. I know that I am not alone in saying that she has been an instrumental part of my life both professionally and personally and I will miss her very much. But although she is no longer with us in person, she will always be with us in spirit, and will never fail to make people smile when they think about her.

