

Honouring the Ancestors: James Lewis Lowery

Wilson Daniel

I feel privileged to have been invited to write in honour of Lewis as one of the tipuna (ancestors) of this Association. In this enjoyable exercise I have been helped greatly by the generous input of information from Joy Lowery, members of the immediate family, friends and colleagues who have shared a wide variety of perspectives. What follows is not meant to be a eulogy or a repetition of tributes offered already in the aftermath of Lewis's death, but rather a personal portrait of the man in his essential humanity.

Lewis was born in Dunedin on 7 January 1930, the youngest child and second son of two good-living and hard-working Christian parents who were devout Baptists. He had two older sisters. The family moved to Invercargill when Lewis was four years old. Lewis and I lived at opposite ends of the same street and became aware of each other at an early age. I was one year older but two years ahead at school, due to the entrance age having been changed from five to six. We both attended Park and Waihopai primary schools and later Southland Boys' High School, sometimes walking together through the beautiful, extensive Queen's Park and Golf Links and experiencing the marked seasonal changes reflected in the colours of the trees.

My two vivid early memories of Lewis were: first in 1946 when, as an officer cadet on a military parade ground inspection, I complimented him on winning the King's medal for .303 rifle shooting; and second, later that same year, tutoring him as a very anxious examination candidate in School Certificate or University Entrance Latin, then a prerequisite for training in medicine or law. Never a linguist, Lewis struggled valiantly with sight translation and conjugating irregular verbs, but fortunately scraped through - a good example of his life-long trait of perseverance!

As a true Southlander, like many of his fellow provincials, he developed from an early age a particular *Weltanschauung* based largely, no doubt, on the panoramic views of Murihiku's wide plains, the distant mountains of Fiordland and Mt Anglem on Rakiura (Stewart Island), the mighty trout-filled waters of the Mataura Oreti and Waiau rivers, the vast expanse of Oreti Beach, the turbulent Foveaux

Strait, and the wonder of the southern lights, the *aurora australis*, radiating heavenwards from Antarctica.

Invercargill is the second southernmost city on the planet. Naturally, Lewis became curious concerning what lay northwards in the world. This interest was intensified during World War II when most families had world maps on the kitchen wall, showing the countries of the British Empire coloured red, so that they could follow the advances and retreats of the Allied armies fighting against the Axis powers of Germany, Italy and Japan. Small wonder then that Lewis later studied geography at University. In other words, the world was to become his 'oyster', but not just of the Bluff /Foveaux Strait variety!

Lewis excelled at sport: in 1947 he played first XI hockey and was Southland Junior Tennis champion (both singles and doubles). His brother reports that Lewis was a 'deadly shot' with his father's .02 rifle, hunting rabbits. Much later, a close friend and colleague commented on Lewis's tennis prowess: "He had a vicious overhead smash which made trying to lob him risky. You didn't often put it over him."

Music was central to his core being. The Invercargill home was alive with music, laughter and humour. Lewis's two sisters played the piano and violin, while his older brother sang tenor. Lewis himself was to develop a fine baritone voice and also played the flute. Later Joy, who was an accomplished pianist, accompanied him and together they enjoyed attending symphony concerts.

His father, a builder of Scottish Covenanting origin, regarded Lewis as something of a dreamer, slow to absorb ideas, and not practical like his older brother. Much later Lewis became very skilled with his hands, a good carpenter who delighted in helping his older son, also a builder, to construct his and Joy's 'dream home' at Macandrew Bay, a few years prior to their move to Auckland. Lewis had an innate love of nature and the outdoors. His father encouraged the children to go camping in their old fold-out caravan trailer and to climb mountains to 'realise their dreams'.

On the home front Lewis's mother, of Cornish extraction and raised on a Central Otago farm, was kind and loving and created a relaxed and happy environment. She loved entertaining people, especially visiting missionaries from China and the Sudan. No doubt young Lewis's future interest in the world religions of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as the many branches of Christianity, was stimulated by listening to their stories. Years later this was all reinforced through working with overseas students from Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific.

Lewis loved and appreciated his mother, even though her scriptural teachings could be very strong and burdensome. In a moving eulogy delivered at her funeral in 1986 he said: "My folks gave me two incompatible things - a real farm 'earthiness' and fundamentalism - it was their unconditional love which made all the difference." Lewis's parents encouraged not only strict adherence to rules and the development of an ability to differentiate between right and wrong, but also enjoyment of simple family pleasures.

In his youth Lewis was a motor bike enthusiast and owned a Triumph Thunderbird (650 cc). On Oreti Beach he was challenged to a race by the driver of an old Model T Ford. Lewis accelerated so quickly that his brother, who was riding pillion, was thrown off and left sitting on the sand, watching Lewis disappear into the distance at high speed.

Following High School Lewis enrolled at Otago University while embarking on a two-year primary school course at Dunedin Teachers' College. During his undergraduate days he boarded privately with a maternal aunt. He plunged zestfully into student activities including Capping stunts and sang in the Concert sextet.

After graduation he spent 1953 in Christchurch while completing his secondary school certificate at Christchurch Teachers' College. Joy and Lewis were married in 1954 when Lewis graduated MA in Geography. They then spent a year in Invercargill where Lewis taught at the Southland Technical College. During that time Lewis decided to enter training for ministry at the Baptist Theological College in Auckland and was appointed to a student pastorate at the newly formed Howick Baptist Church. The years between 1956 and 1961 were very busy but happy with a heavy work-load of theological study, pastoral visiting, teaching and preaching. The births of their two sons were an added joy.

Lewis was greatly influenced by Dr David O. Williams, the principal of Trinity Methodist College and Director of the Methodist Mission Life Line Service, who introduced him to training in pastoral counselling, the non-directive client-centred therapy of Carl Rogers, and to the writings of Harry Guntrip, an early object relations theorist, and those of Howard J. Clinebell Jr and Seward Hiltner, pioneers in pastoral psychology.

In 1962 Lewis and Joy were ready to return to the south. Lewis received a call to Caversham Baptist Church, a conservative parish and a complete contrast to progressive Howick. Whereas his predecessor had conducted a popular evangelistic ministry, Lewis's style was more suited to teaching, but the going was tough. Despite providing some excellent pastoral care (he always kept tools and other equipment in the car boot for helping elderly shut-in female parishioners),

Lewis was becoming increasingly disenchanted with parish ministry. Wider horizons and greater challenges were needed.

In 1963 he was invited to become the first ecumenical Chaplain at Otago University, a position sponsored by the National Council of Churches and with a committee chaired by the then Anglican Bishop, Alan H. Johnston. Lewis was extended and challenged in this role. He immersed himself in new theological trends and read widely in Rudolph Bultmann, J.A.T. Robinson's 'Honest to God' debate, Paul Tillich's 'The Shaking of the Foundations', and many other radical writers.

In 1965 the embryonic Marriage Guidance Committee in Dunedin, with Elisabeth Duncan as Director, appointed two counsellors, of whom Lewis was one. They were sent on two initial training weekends prior to working with clients. In this tentative beginning Lewis insisted on having 'supervision' (a new term in New Zealand) from members of the Otago University Department of Psychological Medicine.

In 1971, on the basis of his reputation as Chaplain, Lewis was invited to set up the Counselling Service at the University of Otago under the direction of the Registrar, Douglas Girvan. Gradually, as Director of Counselling, he assembled a team of counsellors who worked alongside and with the Directors of the Student Health Service. Lewis occupied this position with distinction for 22 years, until he retired in 1993.

After two years as Director of Counselling Lewis made a decision which was to determine his future life direction, viz to become an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. For some time he had felt an inner conflict and had become convinced that his continuing in association with the Baptist Fellowship was reducing his effectiveness in the face of a strong Presbyterian influence both within and outside the University. Such a momentous move was not easy for either Lewis or Joy and carried considerable pain for some time. Gradually they both came to experience a new freedom to develop individually and as a couple. Lewis's main sources of professional support were teams in Marriage Guidance, Ashburn Hall colleagues, several psychiatrist friends, general practitioners, nurses, lecturers, professors, work people and office staff, all of whom he respected and regarded with affection.

As the pioneer and prime mover of Student Counselling Lewis invested his whole being and 'soul' in this enterprise. With a mixture of natural charm and astute networking he gained the support and respect of members of the academic

community and university administration for his pragmatic and innovative approaches in launching the fledgeling service.

During these highly productive years Lewis was also involved in a number of other professional activities. He participated in the educational and group therapy programmes at the Cameron Centre, Dunedin. He taught Intimate Systems in Marriage Guidance organisations throughout New Zealand. He developed with a colleague a course on Existential Psychotherapy.

Around 1973 Lewis was engaged in exploring with colleagues, Peter and Sue McGeorge, Don Kaperick and Liz McCabe, personal growth opportunities in the context of the encounter group movement. Out of this a Gestalt Training Programme was drafted and prospective trainees were interviewed and selected two years later. Although Lewis met and admired Fritz Perls, he sensed his egocentricity and gravitated more towards the connectedness of the Cleveland Gestalt Institute, Ohio.

Lewis emphasised the value and important benefits of professional development and kept himself up to date in researching new psychotherapeutic modalities, e.g. self psychology. He also became an enthusiastic exponent of 'time-limited therapy'. His first sabbatical leave in 1976 was spent on a training course at the Gestalt Institute in Cleveland, Ohio. He also visited counselling centres at Kent State, Harvard, Yale and North Western campuses.

In working with high-achieving students, especially those in schools like medicine, many of whom had come from upper income, status-conscious families and from prestigious private schools, Lewis realised that some were rather too much 'in their heads' and needed to be more 'earthed' if they were to be ultimately effective in their chosen professions.

Lewis had many admirers. Between 1991 and 1993 he exchanged 'soul poems' entitled 'Dialog' with a young, talented and beautiful female client. These had a romantic and spiritual content, style and flavour – reminiscent of the exchanges between Abelard and Héloïse. Many therapists discover their vulnerability to erotic transference and the dangers of acting out inappropriately. Joy and Lewis reached a mutual understanding and firm agreement about the importance of maintaining transparency coupled with confidentiality, the observance of clear boundaries and limiting of outside commitments to ensure a sensible balance between work and family life.

Lewis's involvement with NZAP spanned some twenty years from the early 70s to 1994 and constituted a major commitment. During this time he developed

significant links with colleagues at Ashburn Hall (for example, Reg Medlicott, Ken Bragan), with the Otago University Department of Psychological Medicine (Wallace Ironside, Basil James, Roy and Liz Muir), with Dunedin Marriage Guidance (Elisabeth Duncan), and at the Student Health and Counselling Service (Mary Cockburn and Marianne Quinn). An enthusiastic supporter of the Dunedin branch, Lewis served as a national Council member during the terms of his two immediate predecessors as President, Ruth Manchester and Jan Currie. Prior to his own election in February 1993, important progress had been made with the creation of a Supervision Committee and the adoption of the Constitution Rules, Handbook, Code of Ethics and Complaints Procedures.

Lewis once remarked to a colleague that he felt things had come too easily to him. Jobs had fallen into his lap without any competition. He had a surprising lack of self-confidence which sometimes puzzled those close to him. Among the realities of being human is the need to acknowledge and to accept that individually we are a combination of strengths and weaknesses located somewhere between the opposites of infinite potential on the one hand and distinct limitations on the other. His sense of humility, which arose largely from his home and church backgrounds, could be viewed as negative and a type of self-devaluation. But it was also one of the ingredients of his generosity and desire to help others. From generosity he allowed himself to be persuaded to stand for the presidency of NZAP in 1993. But his lack of certainty and worldliness did not prepare him well for the role. This became painfully evident when a complaint was lodged against a close friend and colleague for a breach of the Code of Ethics. Lewis found himself unable to separate his emotions from the prescribed role functions and expectations of President. Perhaps he, like so many of us, had difficulty in confronting his 'shadow' side. When he became President, the Association was going through a difficult, unhappy time struggling with several burning issues which required attention and resolution. Due largely to lack of experience, expertise and sophistication, the process of drafting a suitable Complaints Procedure within the Ethics Committee was sometimes agonisingly stressful for Lewis and his fellow Council members.

Leadership in any professional organisation can be demanding, particularly in its political aspects. Never openly ambitious or competitive (except on the tennis court, where he played to win), Lewis was not a politician, although he sometimes found himself in the role of peace-maker. Critics emerged, who felt that he was sometimes inflexible, driven, conflicted, perfectionistic and non-objective. Some considered him 'rather stuffy', but always prepared to share and learn. Like so many of us, Lewis had a tendency to overload himself with commitments when

he really needed to conserve his energy in the interests of self-care. His honesty, sincerity and integrity were unquestionable. A former President of the Association has wisely said: "Lewis's life and work need to be set in, and viewed from, the wider context of the evolution of the Association itself".

Having resolved to move to Auckland, where his three adult children were located, Lewis became beset by debilitating indecision, self-doubt and anxieties about finance, health and his ability to find work, despite assurances from colleagues in Auckland. Following arrival in Auckland in early 1994 he commenced some private work attached to the practice of a friend and colleague, taught part-time at the Auckland Institute of Technology and worked with a Maori group on the North Shore.

His sudden and untimely death on 29 November 1994, while on a tramping excursion in the Taupo area with Joy and a cousin, and while still in office as President, was a tremendous shock to the immediate family, relatives, friends and colleagues. Many tributes concerning his life and work were offered during the funeral at Maerangi Bay and later during a Memorial Service held in Burns Hall, First Church, Dunedin. Some were published in the Association's December 1994 Newsletter.

Nearly three years later, during the opening of the new University of Otago Student Health and Counselling building, Lewis was also honoured. A previous Medical Director, Dr Peter Strang, described Lewis's enormous contribution to the service as a father figure who had emphasised the importance of connection with past values together with hope for the future, and who had provided continuity at a period of discontinuity and change in the university's history.

Joy and her two sons and daughter have each written about Lewis, movingly and with great affection. During the children's growing up years he was always approachable, available and reliable, one who championed their moves towards independence. He had focused on their needs rather than imposing unrealistic expectations of performance or behaviour. He had given them the gift of touch. His sensitivity and compassion were demonstrated clearly in his caring concern for Joy in her rehabilitation from serious injuries in a near-fatal accident.

Lewis had an infectious love of life and exploration and became the practical joker in the family and among friends. Later in life his sense of humour was an asset and a source of relief. As befitted his ministerial training, he was a good raconteur and had a fund of racy, pulpit-unsuitable stories which he told with great relish. Some of these, however, revealed a certain sexism, based on a fixed

view of gender roles which stemmed from his fundamentalist background. Several female colleagues felt he never really understood modern women.

Despite this paternalism he was a person for everyone, egalitarian and inclusive. His watchword was: “Develop a real sense of self, treasure good authority, and hold on to your humanity”. He was one of those ‘unforgettable’ persons, with his wide-eyed, open and alert expression, ready smile and direct eye contact. Now, ten years on, we continue to have our own individual and special memories of this complex and at times puzzling man. He will be remembered as a loyal friend, a wise and trusted guide and mentor, a dedicated teacher, a skilled practitioner of his art, and an esteemed colleague. For those of us who value our membership of NZAP he will always occupy an honoured place in our hearts and minds and in the annals of this association.

[Abridged and adapted by the editors with the author’s permission.]