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Two fateful happenings led me to Colwyn Trevarthen

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a reflection on the work of Colwyn Trevarthen and his influence on my scholarly journey in the field of anthropology as told through two unexpected, yet deeply significant encounters.

A near-magical and fateful concatenation of circumstances in the 1980s resulted in my living in Greenwich Village in New York as a visiting lecturer at the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program in the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research. A retired New York labor lawyer, David Mandel, had endowed a lectureship there especially for me to teach a two-hour class on my ideas about the evolution of art. Mr. Mandel had read one of my academic papers in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and, as he himself was passionately interested in the idea that art was a product of biological evolution, he offered this endowment to me for one semester in each of three years. His stipend of $10,000 each year would pay my round-trip airfare from Sri Lanka, where I was living at the time, and allow me to sublet an apartment for the four months of the semester. My very own fairy godfather: a scholar's dream come true.

I called my class "Ritual, Play and Art," and attracted about a dozen students to spend two hours every Monday evening between 6–8 pm. During the other six days of the week I prepared and organized what I would say during class time— I had a lot of ideas that I had gathered and synthesized in a book manuscript that at the time was being read by a university press.

Need I say that living in New York in an apartment on Downing Street in the Village, and having a real, if temporary, position at a university with a fabled history of visiting scholars, was complete heaven? I loved every minute. And on October 31 of my second semester there, the editor-in-chief of the press phoned me to say that my book had been accepted for publication.

Good things come to an end and when the Mandel Lectureship concluded, I wanted nothing more than to remain in New York. After my airline ticket and accommodation were paid, Mr. Mandel's generous stipend had provided $2500 to live on for four months. Adjunct positions at the New School paid only $1400 for the same amount of time. Professors or scholars who had real jobs might agree to teach one two-hour class for $1400, simply for the stimulation and prestige of affiliation with the New School. But it was impossible to live for four months on that amount.

Thus it was that I found a "day job" to support my scholarly habit. I became a typist at a firm that made transcripts of television interviews (CBS's "60 Minutes" and "Sunday Morning" were clients), medical conferences, Wall Street meetings, and just about anything that could be recorded on cassette tape. My fellow transcribers were writers, actors, dancers, film-makers, back-up singers—people like me who needed money to live on while they pursued their dreams. It was a perfect job insofar as we could work as much or as little as we needed or when we were available, which suited those who were auditioning or performing or writing a book.

We were paid by the page, and as I had been an undergraduate piano major, I was a typing whiz. I would work until I had earned $100 each day for four days: in those days, $400 was enough to live on for a week. I still had three days left to prepare my classes, which could be on any subject I chose (two other titles were "Ecstasy: A Neo-Darwinian View" and "The Wages of Literacy"). I was also gathering material from my classes for a second book. As a teacher at the New School, I was entitled to use the NYU Library without cost, and I still had my $1400 salary from teaching.

The tapes for transcription resided in In and Out trays on a table, and when one was finished, we would go to the table and pick up another. Transcribers each had a Dictaphone with foot pedal and earphones, and an electronic typewriter (eventually a computer). We were to type everything we heard (no editing), including "ums" and hesitations or repeats, even profanity. At their studio, the editors of the programs would then use these interviews with the videotape from which they had been recorded. There was a great deal of repetition of questions and segments to get a usable sequence of a few minutes or so in the finished program.

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One day I noticed a set of new cassettes that were part of a documentary television series called *The Mind*. These were interviews with scientists and researchers who were experts on various subjects in neuropsychology. My second fateful miracle occurred: I happened to pick up a tape from the tray labeled "Trevarthen." I heard the interaction of a mother with her 8-week-old son, Liam, who sat in a chair facing her while she talked to him. There were stops and starts and repeats with a man's pleasant voice making comments.

At this time, I was intensely interested in mother-infant interaction as described by a psychologist in New York named Daniel Stern. While reading Stern's book, *The First Relationship,* I was struck by the way the interaction resembled my experiences of listening to music. I had wondered whether "aesthetic experience" of music might derive from this basic human communication, where one person (the composer, the performer, the improviser—like the mother) "leads" the listener along an emotional pathway of loud and soft, fast and slow, up and down, rough and smooth. I had tried to reach Stern, but he did not answer my letters to the New York University Medical School (there was no e-mail then). Later I learned that he was moving from the United States to Switzerland, where he had just accepted a position at the University of Geneva.

Trevarthen's work with Liam and his mother was completely fascinating to me. I went to the cassette pile and made sure that I chose the other tapes of his interview. I had no idea that someone other than Stern was doing this work: making films at 16 frames a second that showed the micromoments of both sides of the interaction, which could be analyzed to fractions of a second.

My first book had been published in April 1988. I boldly sent a copy to Colwyn in Edinburgh, enclosing a letter saying that I was "working on" a television program called *The Mind*. (I did not say that my job was as a menial transcriber of cassette tapes). I told him that I was passionately interested in the subject of mother-infant communication and would love to talk to him. "When you are next coming to the USA," I wrote, "please let me know and I will travel to wherever you are because I need to talk to you."

His reply was immediate. First, he wrote that he had looked at my book and that we "were on the same wave-length." He too had studied ethology, as well as neuroscience and developmental psychology. And, as it happened, he was coming to New York soon and would be happy to meet me. I was living on the parlor floor of a brownstone house that was owned by the widow of an artist. There happened to be a small room in the daylight basement where her visitors sometimes stayed, so I arranged for Colwyn to stay there.

On the day of his arrival, I sat on the front steps of the house and waited for him. Eventually a very tall, lanky man with a shock of white hair loped down the street looking at house numbers. Those who know Colwyn are aware that he is friendly and welcoming, and I felt comfortable with him from the beginning. I showed him his room and he later came upstairs. We talked about many things and I took the liberty of asking whether he would look over part of a chapter of my new book, in which I was introducing some ideas from neuroscience. I was not at all sure whether these were correctly expressed. While I cooked dinner, he read those pages and gave me some helpful comments. He said that the next day he was visiting a colleague uptown, and if I wanted to accompany him, I would be welcome.

The following day we went by subway to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital where his "colleague" had a laboratory for studying mothers and infants. And there was Beatrice Beebe (a former doctoral student of Daniel Stern, whose name I did not yet know), who was young and beautiful, wearing a sort of Indian tunic (and trousers?) that was festooned with tiny bells. She was extremely gracious and showed us her equipment that pictured the mother's and baby's faces side by side as they were actually interacting face-to-face. Some years later, Beatrice invited me to speak to a group of graduate students who met regularly at her home, which was only a street or two away from my own apartment, and we stayed in touch. Her colleague Joseph Jaffe was also there.

When Colwyn and I were traveling back downtown, I asked whether, if I could get the funding, I could come to Edinburgh and work with him. He answered positively but said "Do it soon"— because he would be forced to retire in a few years. He provided me with a reading list, food for thought for months to come.

The New School subscribed to *The Times Literary Supplement* from London, and I used to take it home to read on weekends. I very much liked the book reviews and articles. In one issue I noticed an advertisement on the back page saying that the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh was accepting applications from scholars for six-month fellowships. I wrote immediately to Colwyn asking whether he would sponsor my application, making the case that although I would be in the Psychology Department, I was still "doing humanities." He agreed and in January of 1994 I arrived at the Edinburgh Airport, where Colwyn met me and took me to Aberlady where I stayed with him and his wife Lee for a few days until I found a "bed-sitter" in the city, within walking distance of the Institute.

At first, in the dark and cold of January, knowing no one and staying in my single room on the weekends, I was warmed by a sheaf of typescripts and reprints of Colwyn's articles. I can remember reading passages from them and feeling a physical thrill at an idea or observation or expression of an idea. After I had been in Edinburgh for about two months, Colwyn, Lee, and I went to a program of West African singing and drumming in a building in the Grassmarket. As we left, Colwyn stopped to talk to an acquaintance who was passing by on the street. It turned out that she had a flat for rent on West Bow and asked Colwyn if he knew of anyone who might be interested. This was another coincidence and miracle because the flat was perfect—in the Old Town, just below the Castle, halfway between the University and the city below. I could even walk to Arthur's Seat or to the New Town. Can I say that I have never had such a marvelous place to stay! Once I moved in from the bedsitter, I felt exultation as I walked to the Institute every day, and home again that evening.

As it turned out, I had enough savings to stay eight months longer than the original six. The Institute's director at the time, Peter Jones, was a philosopher of art, interested in my ideas and approach. It seemed that as long as I could support myself, I was welcome. Had I the funds, I would probably still be in Edinburgh. I loved the city, as most people do, and loved my flat, and having my own study at the Institute, and all the time in the world to read and write. Twenty-five years later, I can say that it was the most fulfilling time of my scholarly life.

Of course, I learned a lot from Colwyn and his students, even though none of them were specifically working, as I was, on art or music. One day when I was in Colwyn's office, he handed me a book that he had just received from its author, a neurobiologist and psychoanalyst from California named Allan Schore. Its title was *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self*. I started leafing through and knew that I had to read it. I asked to borrow it and Colwyn said that the next week he had promised to lend it to Ken Aitken, one of his colleagues, but I could have it for the weekend. I took it home and wrote pages of notes in longhand. Years later, in Seattle, I was able to attend the quarterly Schore seminars at the home of a psychotherapist friend, and I once gave a seminar to his group in Los Angeles.

Colwyn introduced me to the art therapy department at the university, where I spoke, and I met other visitors to his department such as Leslie Bunt and Mercédès Pavlicevic (art therapists) and John Locke (a psychologist whose field was child language development). The retired child psychologist, Margaret Donaldson, author of *Children's Minds*, became a friend while I was there, as did Elena Longhi who was living part of the time on the island of Lewis, working on her doctorate about maternal singing. I called on Jacqueline Robarts when I was in London and became very good friends with Bronwyn Burford in Edinburgh. In 1998, after I had left Edinburgh, Colwyn arranged for me to attend a wonderful conference in Crete called "Mutual Understanding: Between Nature, Nurture and Culture."

Everything I have subsequently written has been informed by what I learned about mother-infant interaction from Colwyn and others I met through him. When I first came to Edinburgh in 1994, I had not yet realized the relevance of my work to the field of art therapy. However, that year the American Art Therapy Association invited me to give a keynote at their annual conference (in Chicago), and twenty years later, in 2014, I spoke to them again (in San Antonio). I am gratified that art therapists know and use my ideas. Just a few months ago I discovered that in 2012 a fine M.A. thesis in Art Therapy was written by Elaine Bye at the University of Indiana (Kokomo) in which some of my most recent theoretical thinking was incorporated into arts therapies as a "human behavior for health."

I continue to marvel at the unimaginable coincidences that led me to the New School and eventually to Colwyn. For the poet Robert Frost, two paths diverged in a yellow wood. He chose one and "that has made all the difference." In my case, two unrelated and unexpected occurrences came together and made all the difference in my scholarly journey.