

Louise Donovan – Textile Artist

My Journey into Textile Art

My journey into my creative life has one clear starting point and then many factors shaping and developing it. One of these has been my Jungian journey – that is my process of individuation. Becoming myself, whole and indivisible. Distinct from other people or collective psychology (though also in relation to these).

The starting point came when I was 12. I had whooping cough and was seriously ill, missing a whole term of schooling. While my mother was shopping I used to spend time in a shop I saw as a magic place. It sold fabrics, knitting wools, threads and stockings and was run by a lovely lady who took an interest in me. After a few visits she gave me a hexagon template and some mixed cotton fabrics.

My first quilt was a traditional hexagon design. My mother declared that I would never finish it. This provided the determination to do so! It is a pity that I have no idea what happened to it.

During one of my visits to this magic shop I met my prototype eccentric for the first time. This particular eccentric carried a huge bag in which lay the timer that summoned her back to the oven at home where the cake was baking. The bag looked exactly the same

as the bag in the films I had seen this lady starring in. She was the actress Margaret Rutherford. It soon seemed that much of the content of the shop had been rummaged through with surfaces covered with wools and fabric. There was no question of staying to complete the purchase once the magic bag started ringing. She picked it up and swept out the door declaring, "Must go – the cake is done." Later she featured in the dissertation I wrote in part-fulfillment of the requirements for my Master's degree in Psychoanalytic Studies at Essex: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Eccentricity.

The next major landmark in this journey was my going to Digby Stuart College, Roehampton for Teacher Training in September 1972. This was the last year before teacher training underwent reform and eventually became a graduate profession. The year I started the enlightened Head of the College was the visionary behind a six week introductory course called in my year 'Man the Creator'. She asked us to forget for six weeks the age range we wanted to teach and our main subject and instead to question, to explore, and create our own timetable. Some took it easy but I made the most of every opportunity. I was lucky to have a personal tutor who encouraged and worked with my curiosity. I have since described this as the time when my world turned from black and white into colour.

I went to talks given by artists, sculptors, writers, the poet Danny Abse. I visited schools in deprived areas of London as well as Summerhill – it was the year

before A.S. Neill died. I also visited the last two state schools that were based on Summerhill principles. The Minister for Education who at this time was changing so much and imposing control was Margaret Thatcher. All this fed my questioning and desire to understand how children learn and how and why they fail. My personal tutor who guided my three years of training was very happy to work with this questioning student and granted as much freedom of choice as she could. I signed up for the Child Psychology options and the tutors leading these sessions again inspired. The male tutor who also taught the special education units encouraged us to look at why we wanted to work in this area – what were our motives. When I look back I see this as the start of my considering my unconscious and the part it plays in my life.

My first teaching practice was in a deprived part of London and I loved it. The class teacher and my personal tutor were both impressed with how well it went. My next placement could only have happened with the support of my personal tutor. My questioning had led me to look at Montessori education and I had visited The Gatehouse School in Bethnal Green, a Montessori school set up by Phyllis Wallbank educating children from 4 to 15. I asked for a placement there and this was agreed. I loved my six weeks there and felt that I had really found my calling. I learnt so much from Phyllis who at first I found terrifying. This school still exists today for 3 – 11 year olds. I was offered a job there when I finished my training and I did visit it when I could. I was

tempted but the cost of living in London, even in the 1970s was great. My final placement was in Harrow at a middle school. It was in a middle class catchment area and it was the placement I least enjoyed. At the end of my training teaching jobs unexpectedly dried up. It was very reluctantly that I returned home for the only job I was offered at Woodside School on the Wexham estate in Slough.

I did love teaching and my questioning side had another outlet – asking my Head of Department why we needed so many meetings and what was the purpose of all the paperwork he so liked. This Head of Department, at the end of the academic year, became my husband and chief supporter, champion of my questioning, creative journey through life as I hope that I am of his.

In 1980 we moved to live in Oxford, renovating a house. This was a time of sunshine and shadow as the Amish say. The shadow was about infertility and the sunshine in this was the support and help from the clinic at the John Radcliffe who shared all moments of hope and pain. An early miscarriage led me to find my first counsellor. A recommendation came for someone trained by the Westminster Pastoral Foundation – where in time I was to both qualify as a counsellor and to go on to train others.

During this time in Oxford I did a course on Montessori education and when this was discovered I was invited to work in a local play group. This was another sharp learning curve but one that I gained so

much from. One of the mothers who had played a part in my appointment invited me to a talk on Mothers and Daughters given by a female Jungian Analyst. My first encounter with a Jungian – and a particularly impressive one at that. As we cycled home I said “I am going to do that one day. I am going into analysis”. Disbelief best describes my friend’s reaction.

The time in Oxford also reintroduced me to patchwork and quilting. I made three quilts from bundles of scraps bought from Laura Ashley. I have no idea what has happened to them. I also discovered the beautiful quilts of the Amish – the fine quilting and dramatic strong plain colours. From that time my work made much more use of plain coloured fabrics.

We wanted to make sense of our lives and create meaning. This led us to decide to move to Suffolk, a county we had holidayed in. I wanted to quilt while Rob wanted to write.

I remember someone saying – “If you want to make God laugh, make plans.” It did not work out quite as we thought. We had bought a year before the money ran out and Rob returned to teaching. I had some patchwork and quilting teaching that I enjoyed and I did make some quilts to commission. One was a wedding present, another to someone’s own design and two cot quilts. I also went back into counselling. As I’ve said, I wanted to make more sense of my life – so I started an Open University Degree in Psychology and then began training as a Counsellor at an Affiliate of the Westminster Pastoral Foundation. I obtained

my OU degree and one of my tutors when I graduated suggested that if I applied to teach she would interview me. This I did and it was the start of my OU teaching career. I also gained counselling accreditation, started a private practice and began training counsellors at the Centre where I trained. I was in practice for 21 years and it was a privilege to be a part of so many clients' journeys.

My Jungian journey also progressed. Rob during the early days in Suffolk did a local history course. He met someone who lived in the next village and we were invited to dinner with them. I learnt that she had kept a dream diary for years and went to Cambridge twice a week for her Jungian Analysis. Again I said – I am going to do that one day.

The next step on my Jungian journey was when I told someone I taught with that I wanted to start Jungian analysis. She had arranged four seminars with a female Jungian analyst as part of our ongoing professional development. I was so impressed with that analyst and her insights and was determined to read more and find my own analyst. My colleague asked if I was serious to which I replied yes. The next week she gave me the name and phone number of another female Jungian analyst who she explained would not take me as a client but would know who I could approach – she had a gift for matching client and analyst.

I made contact and drove from Suffolk over to the far side of Essex. We met in her consulting room and the

time I spent there was extraordinary. She seemed to have an insight into my soul. It was afterwards, when we went into her house for coffee, that I learnt more about this remarkable woman who had come to the UK from Chile to escape the Pinochet regime. She told me there was one analyst she felt was right – but she was not sure how far away he was or if he would take me on as she knew he was trying to reduce his work. If he was not able to take me on then there was someone else she could refer me to. I went home and rang him the next day. As soon as I heard his voice I just felt that this was the analyst – and so started my journey into Jungian analysis and the recording of all my dreams

During my analysis I started my Masters in Psychoanalytic Studies at Essex University and there followed two wonderful years. I met interesting fellow students and also lecturers who inspired. We did a mother and baby study and I found a single teenage mother. Both she and her baby and this study became very important. We lost touch when they moved out of the area but I still wonder what their future held. Meanwhile, my studies and reading absorbed me.

Then there came the moment to choose a dissertation and the tutor for supervision. After reading David Weeks' book on Eccentrics, my fascination with the eccentric had been re-awoken and I now wanted to explore this within a Jungian framework. I was convinced that this was not going to be an acceptable idea but was determined to try to convince my

supervisor. I knew I wanted a Jungian supervisor. I also knew that I wanted to be challenged – so I approached Andrew Samuels. To my surprise and delight he was enthusiastic about my idea – and this led to my joyous time of writing my dissertation: A Psychoanalytic Critique of Eccentricity. I appreciated Andrew’s support, input and affirmation. I also valued reading his work – his linking of the inner journey of psychoanalysis and therapy with the outer political world is one that resonates with me.

I consider that all my work - my political textile art, my wedding quilts, and the pieces made as a gift telling someone’s story - are my way of saying: ‘People Matter’.

My Master’s dissertation ends with this story from the fantasy coda at the end of the autobiography of a creative eccentric, the composer David Fanshawe.

“Mr David, why did you do it?” asked the Hippo man after a long and appreciative silence. “Why did you make the Sanctus Journey?” “I did it, your Courtship, because I felt I needed to do it.”

Fanshawe’s father, the Colonel, is called on for his opinion. He replies: “2% of people DO and 98% of people wish they had. Very few people achieve their dreams, the vast majority look back and say “Oh if only I had ...”

My textile art is my version of Fanshawe’s Sanctus Journey.