

INVITED SUBMISSION | PEER REVIEWED

Carolyn B. Kenny: Reflections on a Humanitarian, A Scholar, A Master Teacher, an Elder – and a Friend

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Paying tribute to Carolyn Kenny's contribution to music therapy is daunting. Period. But it is an honour to be invited to celebrate the gift of Carolyn – to bring forward something of the essence of who she was – not only in her body of work, but in her humanity – her aesthetic self from which stemmed her creative body of work. In whatever measure my words afford me, I try to capture the essence of Carolyn – the spirit behind her scholarship, and the side of Carolyn I saw most often – the phenomenological activist; the visionary ecological thinker, the brilliant mentor, and friend. That this amazing visionary, author, scholar, pacifist-activist and elder claimed me as a “friend” was a source of pride in my 25 year experience as her apprentice, acolyte, and the reflective scholar I attempt to be. The following text weaves between these different voices as I tease out the visionary Husserlian “essence” of Carolyn – that is, my experience of it, through the lens of being an apprentice and a friend.

“The forest represents my journey through life. It is my life. I walk through the forest and I can feel the soft ground under my feet. I can hear the birds, other creatures. I'm not alone. I can touch the rich moss, reminding me that life can sustain itself. The triangle is the soft rain which replenishes me constantly. (Kenny, 2003, para. 40)”

Carolyn walked her talk. She developed her scholarship as she lived her life - through a phenomenological framework enriched by her deep connection to nature, and which was a rich personal resource.

It is Carolyn Kenny's relationship to nature that informed and guided her in life, and grounded and inspired her scholarship. While studying for her PhD, she was inspired by Gregory Bateson's *Steps To an Ecology of Mind* (1972) and the emerging General Systems and Field Theories which offered abstract coherence to inter-relational experiences within the music therapy space. Ecological and Systems perspectives fit with her affinity to phenomenology and to her indigenous roots; her authentic way of being – which required her to behold and to bear witness while participating in that witnessing. A Canadian colleague observed these coherent threads in a different way:

Carolyn [...] always seemed to be processing the present moment in a way that allowed it to fit properly into the greater universe of knowledge and experience. She must have developed this early in life because to me it seemed a very reflexive process. While incorporating the present moment into the cosmic 'whatever is out there' - she still managed effortlessly to be present with you, always warm and engaged. Still, Carolyn, in all her

warmth and humanity, gently asserted her position when she felt it was the right one. (MTABC Fall newsletter, 2017)

Ecological thinking and phenomenology were a potent combination and may have accounted for Carolyn's "grounded otherly-ness" – at least as it appeared to me. Her introduction of Field Theory and systems thinking (1989) into the music therapy landscape freed us to think of relationship and the nonhierarchical nature of reality and disciplinary epistemologies in different ways. It empowered and challenged the profession to grow up and out of its well-defined loyalties to specific paradigms. Behind this was a fierce advocate for the rightful role of art as a human faculty – no less relevant to human evolution than language or mathematics (for instance). In light of the great strides our researchers and scholarly thinkers have made since Carolyn's work was published, Carolyn's contribution needs to be framed as the game changer it actually was.

It was 1997 when Carolyn's work with Field Theory and General Systems Theory sifted into my own work - when I was looking for a framework for institutional sound phenomena in my Master's thesis. Until then I did not know that my particular abstractions about many different fields and practices qualified me as a systems thinker. Carolyn's *Field of Play* provided me with a way to think about the relationship of sound in the environment, and to consider a system's approach to institutional programming in Music Therapy. The result was "The Emergent Voice" (Woodward, 2004) - a sound construct that revealed a form of institutional autism and thus, potential ways to provide treatment in an environmental context. These two theories were phenomenologically transformational – not only to my attitude within the complex sound spaces in which I worked, but also for my personal worldview.

Back in 1995 I was an introverted, star-struck Master's degree student in Carolyn's class of ten in North Vancouver, British Columbia. It was Carolyn's second coming for Music Therapy in Canada, having co-founded the first undergraduate program in Canada 20 years earlier. Of the ten, I felt the least worthy of the group and was tongue-tied whenever speaking with her in one to one conversation. I was in the presence of Carolyn Kenny – a living legendary! That uncharacteristic awkwardness around Carolyn continued into my doctoral studies 10 years later. In Carolyn's presence, I was awash with alchemic energies that were laden with ambiguous potentialities which made it difficult to find concrete ground. It always amazed me that she saw through my awkward attempts to contribute to the conversation. It was the brilliance behind her teaching – seeing the potential even when the student did not – and reflecting that back.

Through this perplexing tongue-tied relationship, I worried about when she might discover that I was a colossal intellectual fraud. It may have been her reflective phenomenological otherness that distracted me, but it was through Carolyn that I found my voice in the music of words. What to me was a fuzzy loss of clarity, to her was an abstract mind working over the possibilities. I did not know this. No one had seen that dormant abstract, phenomenological potential (except my 6th grade art teacher) But Carolyn kept reflecting this back, and over time I found a new way to indulge my abstract proclivities through the practice of writing – which was very much connected to the rhythm and flow of speech, sound, and the environment around me.

As I moved my house like a turtle from Canada to Bosnia, Eastern Canada, Ireland, Pennsylvania, and back to Canada, Carolyn's mentorship was grounding me in my own scholarship, and in my connection to various lands and places. There was – beyond words – a musical way of being in connection to the earth, the seasons, the ebb and flow of life. A different kind of beauty – an aesthetic – an essence. I felt – more than witnessed – a kinship to Carolyn through writing. She could see me – not the tongue-tied me. But it was a long journey to find this connection for myself – and in so doing, to eventually meet Carolyn with words worthy of her.

It was not all summer and sunshine. I exasperated my teacher at times. But Carolyn knew when to step back and let the "unstoppable metamorphosis" (Ibottson, 2008, p. 12) happen. This may be because phenomenology was a way of life for her – not just

a worldview. But it was also because she was a wise and masterful teacher. She recognized something already present – that she, the wise elder saw, nourished - and then stepped back so that the student could find her own way. It was not a sudden awakening. It developed over time. The seeds were in place, the water and the sunshine came and went, and the garden grew. The scholar inside gradually woke up and accepted her own voice. Ah – there you are! Yes, Carolyn was a master teacher – an ageless elder. And a fierce guardian. She knew when to pull up the straps and say: “You’ve wandered too far. Come back.”

General Systems Theory is built on the premise of multi-dimensional, inter-related systems. Because there is an inherent degree of isolation as one ponders potential connections that may not be apparent to others, as a friend I sensed the paradoxical aloneness that Carolyn experienced from time to time. It takes patience and before others might awaken to these connections. Much of the time Carolyn was alone in her phenomenological world. But the “Elder” in her was a wise and patient scholar-warrior. I know Carolyn would not like to be cast – even metaphorically - as a “warrior”. But it takes the fortitude, courage and persistence of a warrior to hold your ground when facing a wave of conventional thinking, and Carolyn did this with quiet, persuasive scholarship. Those of us who knew her well, know that Carolyn’s fierce intellect could use convention – or not – as she deemed necessary.

Carolyn was a visionary. Her attraction to ecological and cross-cultural perspectives and the role for the arts in human development inspired her to explore the phenomenological connection between field theory and systems thinking in applications of music therapy. Thanks to her major theoretical contributions in *The Field of Play* (1989) these theoretical perspectives are commonplace in the grand narrative of music therapy today. The fact that we are building our own grand narrative is largely due to Carolyn’s scholarship, her advocacy for the arts in human development, and her penchant for a good story. If you read *Beyond this Point There be Dragons* (2003), you will understand this better. Hers is a unique contribution, bringing disparate epistemologies into a coherent landscape for rethinking the potential of music therapy practice through reflection and scholarship – activated and inspired by the phenomenological path she followed in everyday life. Hers was a legacy of courage and conviction that advocated for an aesthetic voice in research; that needed no scientific demystification to validate its presence in any catalogue of rigorous inquiry.

While Carolyn’s legacy may cross many borders and connect disparate epistemologies and realities with brilliant ontological insight, this was because in part she was grounded as an aesthetic being and fiercely protective of the substantive role of the arts in human development and evolution. Art’s characteristic facility to embrace, or at least contain, paradox, rewards the Aesthetic (essence of being human) with an expansive lifeworld of possibilities. Art is our human legacy, and one that has been a refuge for human sanity and elevated thought throughout its evolution. It has fed our intellectual, social and moral evolution as long as we have existed. Our connection to our world is an aesthetic one – a human faculty – and I believe that, although Carolyn never spoke of this in this particular way – she lived and modelled a coherent life of beauty that somehow rocked between the soft world of aesthetic, reflective experiences and hard core, kick-butt, critical thinking. Behind the reflective, gentle persona, there lived a fierce intellect and an authentic Aesthetic.

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