

MAXWELL JONES: A RECOLLECTION

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Maxwell Shaw Jones, M.D., the renowned psychiatrist, died at his home in rural Wolville, Nova Scotia, Canada on Sunday, August 19, 1990 at the age of 83. A graduate of the University of Edinburgh Medical School, Scotland, he pioneered open systems in psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and schools. The author of seven books, he was awarded Commander of the Order of the British Empire. He was a fellow of Royal College of Psychiatrists, a recipient of the Issac Ray Award, and a member of the Expert Advisory Panel of the World Health Organization.

He peacefully passed away, attended by loved ones at his home. Having deeply contemplated his impending death for the past several years, Max Jones was extraordinarily well-prepared for this final event. The place for this contemplation was the small home he shared with his wife on the upper west side of the Gaspereau Valley facing the sun over the southern hills—a gentle countryside untouched by the contaminants of urban pressure. Rolling meadows and farmlands rise above the Gaspereau River to meet the woodlands on the higher ground. There is an atmosphere of expansive peace and protection that reminds one of a childhood dream of heaven. Max Jones loved this place dearly.

Max spent much of his time in his study, where he continued until the very end to write, read, and stretch his awareness beyond what he called the “mundane concerns and demands of everyday life.” The richly-grained, hardwood door to the study had been sculpted by his wife, Chris, in majestic, flowing shapes and swirls. I often had the feeling that were it not for the anchoring hinges the door would rise like a billowing thundercloud. The interior of the study was lined with books and files. His writing desk faced an enormous window that opened to the wooded hill to the north. Objects of great significance to Max, collected during a lifetime of

traveling, surrounded the tablets of white-lined paper and pens which he used to write his books, essays, and letters. In his final book, *Growing Old: The Ultimate Freedom*, he described this room in a section called "At Home in the Ashram:"

Like many people, I need living reminders of what I believe to be the good life and in this context try to build my own "ashram" in the environment of my study—the only possible answer that I know to my dilemma of immobility. Here is my place of peace where I can contemplate while viewing the wonder of nature outside. In winter the stark trees on the hillside will on occasion assume a beautiful form usually associated with the Virgin Mary, who for obscure reasons beyond my comprehension has for a long time had some particular fascination for me. The form is static but beautiful and reminds me strongly of the similar vision I experienced at St. Peter's in Rome. I am surprised to find how content I am to spend most of my time alone in my office, made necessary by my failing health. My desk faces a huge picture window looking out on an unspoiled tree-covered hillside that has become a friend whose mood changes with the light, the wind, and the animal life. Old age reminiscing in our culture tends to be equated with a somewhat boring interruption of everyday topical conversation or gossip but reminiscing in one's private space may be seen as linked to contemplation. If, for example, I've listened to an audiotape spoken by Bede Griffiths and feel his presence nearby, and am watching nature's changing scene outside my window, I feel like surrendering my thoughts to a greater power beyond my rational mind. Adding to this a reclining chair that invites relaxation, and I'm "in Heaven." This is not only indulging my selfish appetites but is an attempt to get in touch with the mystical. Nor is the visual side of the experience paramount, as on rising in the dark, usually around 3:00 a.m., and sitting in the same office, I may experience a similar set of circumstances. In a sense I'm creating my own ashram peopled by images of those whom I admire most for their humanity and opening myself to the power of the Holy Spirit (1988, pp. 92-93).

Max was a tall man of slender stature, with sparkling brown eyes framed by white hair and groomed beard. He moved with a natural grace and elegance that showed he had no anxious hesitation about being fully present in any situation. Max was a thoroughly educated and endlessly creative man who had made major contributions to the tradition of the "therapeutic community," a tradition he pioneered and spread in the Western world for the past forty-five years through writing, lecturing, and hands-on work. In his later years, he broadened his studies beyond psychiatry to social ecology and spirituality. It seems Max was always reaching for distant fields of learning. His final gift to us was the small book, *Growing Old*. It is always a moving experience to hear the words of aging and dying persons. Spoken or written, such special words communicate the distillation of a lifetime's experience. The book is a poignant con-

temptation on how to face the inevitable threshold of aging and dying, as well as a powerful glimpse into the final days of a man who remains a cultural treasure. In fact, this book is the living transmission of one elder's wisdom to the next generation. Personally, I feel that our Western culture is at risk of diminishing its highest values and discoveries unless we more fully appreciate this process of transmission. Learning to honor and to listen to one's aging elders is an essential developmental stage in becoming a full human being.

I had the good fortune to meet with Max in his "ashram" on many occasions during his last four years. We had many far-ranging discussions about mutual interests. He always took the time to inquire about my wife and children. He showed an especially keen interest in my professional work and how that came together with my spiritual practice. His mind was always probing and searching, alive with youthful exuberance. Max was more delighted by an excellent question than an excellent answer. I often felt a vague uneasiness while with Max, which was partially caused by my own sense of inadequacy and shyness in the company of his obvious brilliance. This anxious feeling was also due to Max's uncompromising refusal to settle for the partial truth that provides temporary comfort and security. As a student of Max's, I came to value this constant restless push to further learning that our relationship seemed to ignite. Perhaps we both felt an edge of fear as we worked to move further with the unfolding process of the next moment.

One particular conversation has left an indelible impression on me. We had been talking in his study with more enthusiasm than usual for two hours. Max began to describe in graphic imagery the phenomenon of the open social system to which he had devoted his life. His tone became hushed, assuming a quality of sacredness, of profound respect. He seemed vulnerable and tender-hearted, almost sad, as if he were in an awe-inspiring place of worship outside of time. For a long moment, I had a glimpse of his vision of the therapeutic community. It was a glimpse of Max's fathomless trust in the intelligence and power of a human community open to any

experience and any communication. The power of the compassion that fueled his ability to skillfully facilitate the development of such an open community was moving to witness. He held the command of active leadership with the hand of humble surrender to the community beyond him. He seemed to be holding this vision before him like a precious jewel that he would protect with his very life. He looked at me and said, "Do you know what I mean?" I had a moment of doubt, since I did not fully know the depth of his profound vision, yet I perceived that fathomless trust in the interpersonal openness alive around us. So I said, "Yes." There was some relaxation at that point. The vivid moment passed, and soon our conversation continued on.

As I drove home later that day, I struggled within myself to remember the details of the glimpse of the therapeutic community vision that Max had shown to me. Words and thoughts were of little help. To this day, years later, I still search for it. On occasion, I recognize its occurrence in groups and communities in which I am involved. Sometimes I only catch a trace or a footprint of its passing. Now that Max is gone I feel a stronger commitment than ever to bring his teaching to my clinical work with people and communities. This is the least I can do to repay Max for showing me his jewel.

I have come to realize that receiving a glimpse of the vision of a teacher serves as a spark for the fresh development of one's own vision. Such a glimpse augments and guides the work of one's personal search for meaning and is not meant to become a revered, burdensome ancestral relic dry of vitality, or a stale credential to puff up one's pride. On the other hand, this personal search should not deteriorate into a free-style, self-serving romp that uses this bit of wisdom in a concoction of one's own New Age "designer" vision. There are necessary elements of dedication, even devotion, to the founder's original vision, together with a thorough schooling in the traditional means of its application, which form the cultural container that balances the student's youthful initiative. Only by the student joining loyalty and freedom in this way does a lineage, a

school, a teaching, or a culture retain its life-blood. Needless to say, Maxwell Jones has touched and inspired countless people in this way by unifying system membership with open expression.

Towards the end of his life Max expressed much concern to close friends that his work in open social systems could be lost to future generations. I share this concern. However, it is also true that what Max discovered and nurtured during his life is rooted in natural, elemental truth. Therefore, the essence of his work is prone to spontaneous re-occurrence whenever people come together with the honorable intention to learn.

The following is a "death poem" that I composed as a farewell to Max. It was presented at a memorial held at Covenanter Church, Grand Pre, Nova Scotia, on August 24, 1990.

*For an old man, you are very young.
For a young man, you are very wise.
For a wise man, you are very humble.
For a humble man, you are very outrageous.*

*You encouraged me and gave me practical counsel
on how to live and work and earn a living as a professional
without selling out to the status quo
of mediocre professionalism.*

*Yours was the great power—not power over others,
but the power of knowing
and the power of articulating the inexpressible
for the benefit of others.
Yours was the driving, irresistible longing for knowledge, for
wisdom.
You found the key,
you found the opening,
you found the touchstone,
you found the bedrock of all that is supremely human,*

our common humanity.

*You found the book of wisdom and took it into your bones,
your fingers.*

*You had the audacity to call yourself a social ecologist,
and the strength to live up to that title.*

*You are a doctor of the world,
a wise man of medicine for the world.*

Your body and mind have now entered the flame of wisdom.

*I promise to pass on what I have learned from you to the next
generation.*