

# Social Atom Repair and Lifelong Learning



A Tribute to Dr Joan Chappell, TEP, QSO  
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*by John Faisandier, TEP  
with assistance from Vivienne Thomson, TEP  
and warm appreciation to other contributors*

Joan Chappell was one of the great thinkers and quiet toilers in AANZPA. She died in 2013 at the age of 92 in Tauranga after a life of working as a psychiatrist, GP and psychodramatist. She grew up in England, moved to Christchurch in the early 1970s before retiring to a 'lifestyle village' in Tauranga in 1992.

She was not easily understood by many in AANZPA. Vivienne Thomson and I were her only two TEPITs (Trainer, Educator, Practitioner in Training) because somehow we were able to tune in to her way of working. At conferences and FTINZ meetings she would make herself available to us, sometimes at 7 in the morning for supervision. Despite, and perhaps because of, her quirky way of working we gained a tremendous amount from Joan.

This article is based on a conversation Vivienne and I have had and written snippets from others who knew Joan that illustrate her wisdom, quirkiness and character.

Joan was born in 1921 in England. This was post WW1 England. Joan was left for dead at birth. It was only by chance that a nurse paused to look in the bucket where her tiny body had been placed and realized that she was actually alive. This was a portent for the rest of her childhood. Her mother was emotionally unstable and was not capable of giving her even the most basic of nurture. Joan knew that at the age of four she had to parent her mother. This experience was the foundation of her interest in the Black Void and Parentified Child which she wrote extensively about, much of it unpublished. In the whole extended family there was no touching, no fun and no laughter as she grew up. Her life was dominated by rigid rules and no understanding of the needs of a child. Her bedtime every night in winter was 6pm. One Christmas day the turkey was not yet cooked by 6pm. She was required to go to bed rather than stay up late for the Christmas celebration. When she told this story at a trainer workshop we immediately created a fantastic Christmas scene for her. The whole group took on roles such as the fairy at the top of the tree and all sorts of other magical creatures. Joan joined in the fun – whoopee she'd say flinging her arms in the air. When it was over she returned to her analytical self and gave a brief report of her situation. Many found that frustrating and just wished she could keep playing the Christmas game. But that wasn't Joan!

She was highly intelligent and at the age of 17 went to university to study medicine. This for her was the only way she could escape the tomb that was her family home for those first significant years. It was the beginning of her life time work of social atom repair and dedication to helping others less fortunate. After graduation she worked in London and had considerable involvement in the Tavistock clinic for the treatment of

post-war trauma and alcohol addictions. It was there where she first encountered psychodrama.

Joan said she believed in the sanctity of marriage and was fortunate to have had two very happy marriages. Her first husband was Ted Chappell who was Italian by birth and a translator during World War II. He became an accountant at the British Medical Association after the war. Ted died of a heart attack in the early 1960s and Joan married Dr Norman Mathias. Norman was a GP in central London and was deputy Chair of the British Medical Association. It was with him that Joan got to have many adventures meeting famous people and travelling to numerous international conferences. They moved to New Zealand to be near his daughter who was ill however Norman died soon after they arrived in New Zealand. Joan decided to make Christchurch her home to be near her step-daughter and family, valuing them as the nearest to her as anyone could be as blood relatives.

First impressions of Joan for most people were not positive. For many the tight grey bun, stern face and her cryptic communications with very little chatter or small talk put them off. Many found her hard to follow. Mike Consedine told me once that he worked out why people couldn't follow Joan. "She jumps from step one to step four, where most people have to slowly reason their way through steps two and three, she just goes straight to step four because it is so obvious to her."

Her directing was like that too. She would produce the most unlikely interventions that resulted in significant movement for the protagonist who trusted them. She told me once that this was because she followed the warm-up of the protagonist very carefully. As a doctor she was so aware of what body movements and reactions the protagonist was making, things that most people did not even notice, let alone register as significant. This was a very strong teaching of Joan's. "This method is a body method," she would say. "You must always be aware of what the protagonist is doing. And if you don't know the significance of what the body is doing, then find out. Do a course on the body, learn some basic bioenergetics and any other science that will help you."

Joan herself was a lifetime learner. She engaged in the very early T-groups in the 1960s and said this helped her to understand herself and how groups can form healing communities. When she was a trainer in Christchurch she told me that she wanted to be a student in three different disciplines at the same time to maintain her awareness of what it is like to be a learner. She was learning the piano, horse riding, ballroom dancing, tennis and several other things at different times when she was my trainer. This was when she was in her sixties and seventies.

## Awareness of Sociometry and Influence

Joan moved to the lifestyle village (“not a retirement village!” she insisted) of Greenwood Park, Tauranga in 1992. She was 71 and one of the first residents in this new way of living. She loved it and got very involved in the community there, making sure she was on residents’ boards and committees. She advised Vivienne to make sure that she didn’t leave her move too late, because “the earlier you can get in to such a community the

sooner you can become ‘top dog’ and influence what goes on”



Joan with Dame Sylvia Cartwright, Governor General of New Zealand at Joan’s Investiture, Government House, 2006

She was acutely aware of social position. She would talk about the political machinations of the village and how she had to make sure she gave due deference to the appropriate people and let them know of

her expertise in subtle but clear ways. When she received her New Year’s Honour of QSM which was about a fourth level award, many in the village were surprised and somewhat envious as they only had first or second level awards. She was quietly satisfied that her considerable contributions to society had been appropriately recognized. Joan often coached me to make sure I related correctly to the authority structure of AANZPA, especially to Max Clayton and the Board of Examiners during my training. This, she said, was important for all AANZPA members to know so that the association functioned well.

She had immense respect for authority figures in the churches. While claiming she in no way believed in religion and the afterlife she claimed to be in good standing with both the Catholic and the Anglican Bishops of Christchurch, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church and the chief Rabbi. When I left the priesthood she would constantly ask me about my ‘relationship with Rome’ and whether I had communicated appropriately with the authorities there. I tried to reassure her that it didn’t matter to me anymore, but she wouldn’t let that lie for at least 15 years after I had left.

Keeping a strong positive relationship with those in authority was important because of the degree of influence that it gave her. She was passionate about creating a better world, especially in the health sector but also in the wider social welfare community. A story told at her funeral by a family member was that there was a minor politician who was married to one of the step-cousins. When they got together at Christmas time, Joan would bail this man up and ask what he was doing about this policy or that. It became quite a talking point in the family that she was holding him personally responsible for not changing things for the better. She expected this of anyone who was involved in public office.

Her own contribution was to join many associations and organizations that helped those in need. When I listened to the citation read out at her investiture for the QSM, I felt humbled to be a friend of this remarkable woman. She continued her work of improving society in her later life by making considerable donations, usually anonymously to the Greenwood Park village and through agencies such as the Salvation Army and other community groups in Tauranga.

She held Max Clayton in very high regard and was always very respectful of him. While at times she would appear to be deferential to him, at other times she would challenge him with great courage, tact and love. This is illustrated in this story from AANZPA member Dr. Peter Parkinson.



At times, during the years when I was running my General Practice in Thames, I was gifted by the presence of Joan who would come and stay with me for weeks at a time. She would come and work side by side with me as a fellow GP. This lifted the pressure of client load from my shoulders, and gave us time slots during the day for snippets of psychodrama, development and training. One day she asked me to set out my social atom aged seven. This I did and she noted that I had only my pets in my inner circle, especially cats and dogs. All humans I allocated to positions outside of my treasured canine and feline friends. Included in the inner circle were 22 golden retriever puppies. These were from three litters that had all arrived at the same time.

About six months after this event I was attending a training workshop run jointly by Max and Joan and I was protagonist in a session that was

being directed by Max. This session ground to a halt with Max saying to me: “How can I direct you if you don’t trust me?”

At that moment Joan stood up and said “Max I’m taking over!”

Like a lamb, (would you ever believe it!) Max sat down and Joan came and stood beside me and said: “Peter. Choose 22 puppies.”

It was beyond consideration that human beings should represent my puppies. I remained intransigent. Joan then said to the group: “We need 22 puppies!”

Whereupon the bulk of the group went down on all fours, trotting across the floor towards me. They panted all over me, licked me, and even went through the motions of urinating on me.

It took that moment to dissolve the defences that I had developed to deal with an inappropriate bunch of authority figures who thought that they could alter my dyslexia by getting angry with me, caning me, and excluding me from friends and times of play and enjoyment.



## **Further Stories**

A number of people were invited to share stories of Joan.

### ***Peter Parkinson***

For me it was special to have someone medically qualified beside me who could talk in physiologic terms as well as psychodramatic. We worked together on her “Black Void” hypothesis. While directing she would come and stand beside me and say: “Did you see her (the protagonist) go into adrenal collapse (Black Void) just then. See the colour has totally drained from her face!” It was very clear once she had pointed this out, but I had no skill or knowledge what to do at his moment. I shared this with her.

“First you must nurture to get the adrenal cortex up and running.” (The adrenal cortex secretes the steroids and imparts a sense of wellbeing)

Joan immediately put an arm around the protagonist until she handed the role of nurturer over to an auxiliary. She then indicated for me to continue directing, while she doubled. As the scene of the confrontation that previously dropped her into “the back void” proceeded, the colour returned to the protagonists face and the spontaneity to respond appropriately and effectively ensued.

### ***Bona Anna***

Joan was indeed a significant person and positive influence in Christchurch training and in the wider association.

One of Joan's favourite sayings was "throw the switch", which I understood as her version of develop a progressive role, or in Moreno language develop a new response to an old situation.

I remember her dog, whose barking responses paralleled the emotional tone of group processes and psychodramas during training group at her Port Hills home in Christchurch.

Joan was always supportive and always available. It was never too early in the morning to phone her. Indeed, her favourite time to be contacted was before work. I had a picture of her up bright and early every morning, keen to get stuck into the duties of the day.

### ***Paul Baakman***

I will relate three anecdotes I remember:

One day, I was driving back from a Dunedin psychodrama event, with Joan as my passenger. She was not shy in giving me driving instructions. I steered the conversation to a personal level and mentioned that I had been divorced. Joan said that, in working with divorced people she would often put forward the idea that following a trauma or 'major life event' "you either grow better or bitter". I have often remembered this little slogan and will sometimes quote it to a client.

Another time I saw Joan for supervision, prior to a presentation I was planning. I wanted to tell my story but she interrupted me by asking: "what do you want from this session". Despite my attempts to tell 'my story', she was like a little terrier, insisting on a 'contract' for the session. At the time I felt somewhat puzzled and irritated. Later reflections led me to value her intervention in the sense that she made me focus instead of drift. I learned about 'contracting' for a session and that there are times when this needs to be 'tight'.

Within psychodrama culture, Joan made a stirring plea for the 'director' to be called 'producer'. Her thinking was that only those with severe problems needed 'directing'. With most other people, the health would appear by producing rather than directing the drama. This contribution by Joan reflected her deep respect for people's self-healing abilities and her unwillingness to infantilize a trainee or client.

### ***Vivienne Thomson***

Joan expected a great deal from advanced trainees in particular. When producing a drama she instructed the whole group to be patients in a mental hospital. People were slow to respond and she cried out "Be spontaneous – you are all advanced trainees!"

There were many quirky things Joan did. When she was packing up her house at the Village to move to hospital care she said to me one day

“would you like a piano?” I only had my small car and a long trip back to Auckland so I said a book would be more suitable. Joan said, “this is one of the most formative books I have ever read”. It was Jokes by Sigmund Freud! She told me the book had taught her how to have a sense of humour after growing up in a humourless family. There were lots of underlining and side notes in the margins. Many of the jokes were rather dubious Jewish jokes but the book reflected Joan’s determination to make herself more human.

### ***John Faisandier***

The first time I met her she interviewed me about joining a skills and theory group for people working in community agencies in Christchurch. When I said that I wanted a support group to help me in my work as a parish priest she immediately said “Support is a no-no word here!” Thus began my 25 years of learning from Joan.

She could also be a caring and sensitive therapist. When I was in the process of leaving the Catholic priesthood I would often go for my weekly supervision session with her and should I indicate that I wanted to do personal work that day, she completely changed her posture and attitude to become the therapist rather than the supervisor. Otherwise I was there as an advanced trainee and needed to take control of the session.

### **Joan’s psychodramatic family**

Joan spent the last two or so years of her life confined to bed and not much able to do anything. This was very frustrating for her. She didn’t hide the fact that she was frustrated and sick of living this way. When asked once how she was going, her response was “Well I’m not making any plans”. She was not sentimental or gushy in the least but she was determined to create a life for herself that was full, purposeful and connected with many people. She often used to say to us at trainer meetings and other psychodrama gatherings that “You are my family”. We felt proud to be special for her and part of her conscious social atom repair work. It was amusing to hear at her funeral so many representatives of other organisations stand up and say that she told them “You are my family!” Joan made sure she had many families to make up for not having a good enough one at the beginning.

From beginning life with an emotionally inadequate family Joan made sure that she did not end her life that way. Her funeral was a tribute to her, with many telling stories of her wisdom, generosity and her love for them and the underdog.



Her teaching will live on in our association through those of us who have been touched by her and her deep desire for social change, for the significant contribution to our training she has made as both trainer and as a member of the Board of Examiners, and also in our work of producing dramas that heal.

Thank you Joan.

*John Faisandier is a Wellington-based TEP who did the majority of his training in Christchurch. He chose Joan as his primary trainer for certification as a psychodramatist and as a TEP. John spends his time training corporate groups in NZ, the Pacific and Asia on how to manage emotions in the workplace. He quotes Joan Chappell-Matthias's wise sayings frequently in his workshops. John is a serial entrepreneur and is currently setting up a workplace skills training academy in Bangladesh. This provides him with many spontaneity tests each day. Email John: john@tuf.co.nz*



*Vivienne Thomson is a TEP and Director of Training at the Auckland Training Centre for Psychodrama. Joan Chappell-Mathias was Vivienne's Primary Trainer both for becoming a sociodramatist and a TEP. Beyond that*



*Vivienne and Joan shared the experience of having been members of the Board of Examiners, their love of music and dance, gardening and being with family.*

Lynette Clayton, Joan, Vivienne, and Dale Herron