



## **“Just an Ordinary Max Clayton Person”**

*FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH MAX CLAYTON BY PETER CAMMOCK*

*EDITED BY GILLIAN ROSE*

*INTRODUCTION BY PETER CAMMOCK*

# Introduction

I met with Max on 26 September 2002 in his home in Eastbourne, Wellington. Our conversation took place as part of research I was conducting for my book *The Spirit of Leadership*. The focus of the book is on the life journeys that led people into their vocational callings. Having participated in a psychodrama weekend with Max a few years earlier I was confident that he was someone who experienced his work as a calling rather than just a job or career. My assumption proved to be correct. We had a wonderful conversation in which Max related his early life experiences and told the story of his journey into psychodrama. His story has all the elements of the early intimations and later invitations that precede a significant life's work, and perhaps provides a little more understanding of how he was able to make such an extraordinary contribution through his work. It was a great privilege for me to hear Max's life story, and although it was over a decade ago I remember our conversation well and with great warmth and appreciation. In my book the final quote I referenced from our interview covered Max's reflections on his life and the deeper elements that surrounded it. This quote says much about Max's life philosophy and I think is a fitting preface to the fuller interview that follows.

*Sometimes I do lose myself in the sort of immensity of the universe and feel at one with it. I wouldn't think of myself as a very spiritual person. But I think that spirit is the most significant thing in a human being. And I tend to think that when I start to be a bit more in touch with my spirit, or my 'I Amness' that I feel one with the universe. Look I used to not think very much about Carl Jung and I didn't think very much about synchronicity. And I didn't think very much about the universe bringing things. But I do now. And I'm sure, none of these things that have happened to me, happened by chance. I'm sure. I'm sure that the good teachers I've had haven't just come to me by chance. But then, I can't prove that. All I can do is say that I have a tremendous sense of wonder and awe about these things that have happened.*



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# In Max's Own Words

## Becoming Expressive

I suppose my interest really was in folks becoming expressive. From my early years on I was often quite expressive. I certainly enjoyed being expressive. When I was very, very young, the doctor told my mother I was going to die; he said probably within a few days. The reason being that I vomited up all my food. My mother was breast-feeding me and I just vomited up everything. She gave me various formulae. The doctor said, "Well none of it's going to work, he's just going to die". My mother was a very determined woman; she didn't agree with the doctor. She kept mixing new mixtures and fortunately she found one that I didn't vomit up anymore. Afterwards, I cried and moaned a lot apparently. I'd wake up and cry and my father would take me for walks at night-time and calm me down. So I must have been very expressive because my family and relatives all talked about me making a lot of noise when I was young.

I definitely value the times when we'd be sitting around the dining room table when I was quite young and my father and mother would be having a conversation, or they might be reprimanding my brother or sister or me. I would often answer back and I would often be reprimanded for answering back, but I just couldn't stop myself from making comments about what was going on. Comments about the family and family interactions.

The same thing happened at school. Mostly I was pretty quiet. But from time to time I would have my say. And I used to have friends and I'd be pretty expressive with my friends. I enjoyed playing football and running and tennis, walking in the bush and cross country running and all those things. I just loved to express myself.

The household I was growing up in, sometimes there was conflict and that got me reflecting about what was going on and what was happening. About my father and my mother and my brother and sister. There were many other relatives living nearby in Melbourne and I had a lot of interaction with them, and I did a lot of reflecting.

But my father and mother were pretty expressive, especially my father. My father was a teacher and I certainly identified with my father. Even though I had conflicts with my father, I also identified with him, especially his ideals. I liked his expressiveness. He was lecturing a lot. He wrote books. He wrote school text books and I liked that. There's no doubt he had a lot of influence on me becoming expressive, quite apart from me being an Aquarian. Later on in my life I did discover I was an Aquarian, even though my family didn't believe in astrology. Everything said about the Aquarians fitted for me very well. Me having big mood swings and being very enthusiastic and getting quite low spirited; later on, quite depressed. And then coming out of it and getting very involved and full of

life again — but often big swings in my moods.

My mother was always very encouraging. She was very interested in me. Very interested in what I did. She wanted to know how I was going at school. Then there were some teachers at school who were very expressive people and I liked them a lot. I definitely identified with some of my teachers. There was the teacher who taught gymnastics. I definitely accepted him and what he did to a great degree. I loved everything he did. I liked the gymnastics. I liked the way he taught. He was very enthusiastic, very encouraging and full of life.

## School Days

My first teacher at school was again very expressive, very alive, very interested. Got me playing, experimenting, drawing and I felt very easy and free. I just loved to express myself in her class. I arrived there and because I was Mr Clayton's son I was expected to be able to write and read and do sums and be pretty brilliant. So she put me in a higher grade. People were sitting there doing sums and I had sums in front of me to do and I couldn't do them. I looked at the others and I was just copying what they were doing. She came along and had a bit of a chat and she said, "Come out of your seat". She took me to the back of the class. It was full of Tinker toys and other toys. I'd never seen so much stuff, it looked fantastic. There was a carpet on the floor and she said, "Sit here and enjoy yourself".

I sat there and enjoyed myself for two or three weeks just making things on my own while the other people were doing stuff. Then after that she said, "Oh come and sit in this row". And that was the first row, you know, which I should have been in, in the first place. I think that was very significant, actually. Being able to not have any shame that I couldn't do these tasks. I did feel pretty upset that I couldn't do these tasks. But she didn't mind at all and she just put me in a spot where I could just gradually feel at home there. I felt really at home in that school. It was fantastic.

I had a lot of teachers like that. Later on in secondary school I had a Latin teacher who most people were very frightened of because he used to come in and speak with a loud voice and he'd often shout. He'd come into the room and he'd say, "Right, George what's the third person participle of ...", and then he expected to get an answer. But if someone couldn't answer he'd just ask someone else. He was very expressive. He would teach about famous Roman people: poets, authors, generals and senators, interesting women; about the politics and social life, the economic life.

It was just extraordinarily interesting. He was so involved in the subject. He would often get very worked up about a particular bit of writing, usually one of Cicero's speeches, and he would stand on a chair. Then he would climb on to his desk and he would give out this speech standing on his desk. Then he would come down on to the floor again and walk around. He would introduce

competitions in the class. It was very alive, very good, I loved it. There was another geography teacher who had a similar personality. He would take us on excursions. He was very involved in the subject and he would give us projects to do on interesting things.

Then there was another teacher who was in charge of drama in the school and he would produce plays. I wasn't very interested early on. Then I decided I would audition for a play. I got the part of Robert de Baudricourt in George Bernard Shaw's *St Joan*. He's in the opening scene. And I got very expressive. I just blossomed when I acted in that play. I acted in other plays and I travelled to Tasmania with this company and acted. Sometimes I'd forget my lines and I'd ad-lib and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was good at acting but I didn't pursue that. My family wasn't favourable toward acting because they were in a religious group that was very strict and they didn't believe in things like movies or stage acting; stuff like that. Although my father and mother were favourable towards Shakespeare's plays and certain other plays. But they certainly never wanted me to be an actor. I was definitely tempted. I think I would have been pretty good actually as an actor. I think I would have been quite fulfilled.

## Wanting to Create Something

Look, when I was a young boy, I used to go and listen to my father preaching in a church. Quite often I would walk home, sometimes with my brother or my sister and sometimes on my own at nighttime. Walk home for about a mile and the stars would be shining. And I remember one particular night feeling quite a bit, being in the presence of the stars. I think this has got something to do with this hero's journey actually. I certainly felt a lot. I felt a sense of wanting to create something; really do something in this world. This was when I was quite young, probably about 8 or 9.

Then when I was a teenager, there were quite a few people who influenced me in a significant way, apart from my teachers at school. Most of these people would have been preachers in churches or teachers in a religious setting, not necessarily a church. There was David Scott for example, who was a master in the school where I was, who was involved in a religious group called the Crusader Union. One of my relatives was the founder of the Crusader Union in Victoria. Anyway, I got introduced to it when I was a teenager.

My brother was going to the Crusader Union group at school, at lunchtime, and they usually had a speaker and some questions. The speakers would speak about something to do with the Bible, or Christ, or faith, or vocation. Then there'd be lots of speakers who'd come along. It always had a message that you could express Christ wherever you were. Anyway I was always pretty interested in this. I certainly identified with what they were saying and I became a regular part of this group. The last part of my schooling, this teacher came along and asked me to be the leader of the Crusader Union group. I didn't know I could do that

but he was very clear that he wanted me to be the leader and that I was the right person. And I said I would.

## Leadership and Meaning

So that got me definitely in a leadership role and sort of being out front. And I was identified with this group in the school, with my friends. Most of them weren't part of this group, some of them were, but most of them weren't. Hardly any of my friends were. So I felt pretty different quite a bit of the time. With a lot of my friends I felt pretty different. Even though I continued to play sport with them and socialise and have a good time. But it wasn't a peaceful sort of a time.

I certainly felt a great sense of meaning in my life when I was part of that Crusader Union group. This was a time that definitely enhanced my sense that I had something to contribute to the world. Because I was so well motivated I had interesting chats with people. When I went to the university I used to chat people up. I wasn't using religious language all the time, or probably very rarely. But I was interested in having chats with people and lots of people would start discussing things with me; about what they thought about life and what it was all about. I guess we had philosophical chats. Often I found they would go away and come back and say, "Oh that was very helpful you know, that conversation". And I realised that some of the things I was doing were actually quite helpful. That started at school, people would give me feedback. I think that's really where this thing started. Where I started to realise, through the conversations and getting feedback, that people benefitted from being with me. And I was astounded. I thought "Gee, that's good".

## Awakening Imagination

Then there was a person called Montague Goodman who used to write religious literature. Came out from England and stayed at my parents' house and he had a big influence on me. There was a missionary from the Congo, called J. Alexander Clark, who'd walked across Africa four or five times and knew Livingston and had been given the highest order of merit by the king of Belgium. He was very inspiring when I met him.

These different people they really awakened my imagination a lot. I had a relative who was my great uncle. His name was Ernest Clarke and he was married to Minnie Clarke. They'd been missionaries in China, in Western China, all their lives. From the early twenties on. They'd learned to speak Mandarin and the other Chinese lingo. Ernest used to speak in a rather boring voice, but he was tremendously interesting speaking about China and his life there.

They were inspiring people. I used to think to myself, "I think I'm going to be a missionary in China". But I found it all pretty scary because at the time there were some pretty scary things happening in China. I thought I'd probably

lose my life there; but it was the idea of being a missionary in China.

Then I met this man from New Zealand while I was at the university. It would have been my third year at the university, I think. He was giving some electives in the university and I was driving him around and he would chat to me about his life. He was doing a lot of good work with alcoholic people. That's when I started to think that I could become a minister, when I was with this guy who was a minister. I was associating being a minister with counselling with alcoholics. And counselling with the wide range of people that this guy would chat to me about when we were driving along. I thought, "Oh, that's interesting". And it sort of fitted with me having had conversations with people that seemed to be helpful. So already I'm developing a particular identity. I just felt my real thing was I wanted to be involved in counselling and psychotherapy; probably while I was a minister in the church I thought at that time.

### Floored (for the last time)

The main influence there was meeting Seward Hiltner from Chicago. He was in the Chicago Divinity school; subsequently was a professor at Princeton. He came to Melbourne and he was teaching and I was in some of his classes. There were two things that got me in. One was his flowing style of teaching and the stories he told. There was plenty of illustrations as well as theory, so there was a good integration of theory and practice. I could imagine what he did. I could just see what he was doing, it was easy to see.

He organised a role play and he got me to be the minister in this role play. He played the role of a member of the church who had marital problems. I set up my office and he arrived at my office, knocked on the door and I asked him in. He was insisting that I meet with him and his wife to sort this problem. He wanted me to persuade his wife to take this course of action. I knew that was wrong and I wouldn't do that. But I was so frozen, you know, I could hardly think of what to say. But I knew how to say "ah ha", and I knew how to reflect a few things back. But he kept pressing me. He was starting to criticise me, because I wouldn't do this thing that he was asking me to do, which I knew wasn't the right thing to do at all.

So I was doing this in front of quite a large class. Afterwards I felt tremendously embarrassed and defeated and I felt I'd done an awful job. I felt I'd shown myself up in a very bad light. I thought probably I'd never be any good as a counsellor. So subsequently I brought all the books that Seward Hiltner had written and I read them all. I thoroughly absorbed his teachings and I started to practice it.

I found after this experience, after that, I was never floored. No matter what a person did, I don't think I ever got floored like that ever again. I bought Carl Roger's stuff and that made sense to me. Then I met a psychiatrist in Melbourne who took an interest in what I was doing and used to give me some supervision. I used to write notes of what I was doing and he'd write back and I'd occasionally

see him in Melbourne. He was in charge of child psychiatry at the Royal Melbourne hospital. Anyway I saw quite a bit of him.

Then, when I was studying at the University in my fourth year, I was sitting at the library and I just had this experience where I felt, “Gee! What am I going to do with my life?” I felt very strongly I should be a minister in the church. The trouble was I was part of a religious group that didn’t have ministers. So I was a bit stuck there! Shortly after that I joined a church — I joined the Presbyterian Church.

I had dreams about it. Oh, there was Billy Graham coming to Melbourne and I was a Billy Graham counsellor. But all those things were all in line with me feeling I had something I really needed to do. I didn’t know quite what it was. But when I thought ‘ministers’ that fitted the best at that time. I applied to be a candidate for the ministry. I was accepted, to my astonishment, since I hadn’t been in the Presbyterian Church very long at all. I completed my degree at the University of Melbourne; I’d done half a law degree so I quit doing the law degree and I did my theology degree and then I did a divinity degree. Then I was a minister.

## The Motivating Force

But the motivating force, the driving force . . . I suppose I did experience *this desire to do something in the world* as a driver, or a driving force. It wasn’t a cruel driver, but it was a very strong motivating force. It was something that made me very restless. In my life, I’m not a peaceful person. I don’t experience peacefulness often. I’ve got a sort of a driving energy. I don’t sit there very happily for a long time reading a book. I don’t very happily sit there writing, writing, writing, for long hours. I’ve got to get up and go for a walk or go and chat to somebody. I’ve done my best writing when I’m doing counselling or psychotherapy sessions. Often I’d do writing for 2 or 3 hours and then I’d do psychotherapy sessions before and after and then do some more writing. I guess I feel things should be all of a piece. All one life, sort of thing.

I’ve got a tremendous sense of vocation. It’s not a job I’m doing. I used to conceive of it as helping people. When I started getting into this area, at the university, and subsequently, I always conceived of it as helping people. People would ask me, “What do you want to do?” I’d say, “I want to help people”.

Now I laugh at that quite a bit. Although it still means quite a bit too. Like *real* help for people. In the sense that Eric Berne discussed, people rewrite their scripts and re-order their lives. I’ve come to see, more clearly than I used to see, that the most important thing is for something to develop within *myself*. Well, within myself and in my outward life, the way I organise my life. So, especially since I stopped working in Perth, especially since then, I’ve paid much more attention to organising my daily life so that it’s got more balance in it. I do more study now than I used to do in Perth. I do more reflection. I walk in the bush more. I go to movies. I go to shows. I interact with people. I go out to dinner more often now. Just little meals with people in their homes or in a restaurant.



I do my training in a different way. I'm more relaxed than I used to be. I'm probably less fiery. I can be fiery, but I'm much less driven, I think, now, than I used to be. I do my counselling in a much better way. It's more relaxed. I'm quieter in myself than I used to be. I'm enjoying life a hell of a lot more now than I used to. I am more at peace with myself than I used to be. But I don't think I'll ever be that peaceful.

I've got a much different notion about the work now, in my vocation. There's much more emphasis on the fact that I've got to be alive within myself. I'm full of energy again and I think it's due to the fact that I've given a bit more room for myself. And the work goes better. The work is miles better, from my point of view.

## As Ordinary as I Can Possibly Be

My mission is to be as ordinary as I can possibly be. Just an ordinary Max Clayton person and get with people in an ordinary way and teach. And if I warm up, and if they warm up, I warm up and I do better. But basically I'm just getting together and seeing what emerges.

I used to not think very much about Carl Jung. I didn't think very much about synchronicity and I didn't think very much about the universe bringing things. But I do now. And I'm sure none of these things that have happened to me, or you, happened by chance. I'm sure that the good teachers I've had haven't just come to me by chance. But then I can't prove that. All I can do is say that I have a tremendous sense of wonder and awe about these things that have happened.

I came over to New Zealand with Chris, a bit over four years ago. I left a good work in Melbourne and I thought, "Oh, I want to go and live in New Zealand". Chris said, "Well why?" I couldn't say. I just had a feeling for it. Things have been good for me in New Zealand. Things have opened up for me here. I've learned a lot while I've been here, the last while. And I think, well, the universe has brought these things to me. I've done something too, I suppose, but to me it's just incredible, how things have just, emerged. It's just an incredible sense of being given to, all the time.



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