



A Tribute to Paolo J. Knill
by Michael Siegell, Ph.D. Cambridge

Michael Siegell is a student, friend and colleague of Paolo Knill's for nearly 33 years. Combining clinical, scholarly and artistic activities, he is a longtime student of cross-cultural studies of the arts and psychology and also one of the very few westerners to study and play the sitar, having lived in India for long periods of time. He was an Academic Fellow at EGS, Saas-Fee during the 2011 Summer Session. He is Professor and Director of Psychology at the School for Undergraduate Studies, Cambridge College, Cambridge, MA, USA.

Paolo

There is a recurring experience that Paolo and I share, one that I don't believe either of us completely grasps. It seems that more often than not, whenever he is coming or going from the Boston area – even after a year or more gap – we somehow run into each other in a neutral place. He might have just arrived from the airport before going home, or getting ready to go to South America in an hour. Sometimes it is in a parking lot or a market that we recognize each other, or in some byway or open space. Neither of us knows the other one's schedule or itineraries but we still no longer feel surprised by our encountering each other this way. We don't often speak for long then, but we do have a kind of contact that always feels both timely and somehow especially meaningful. For myself, I've started to refer to these connecting moments of ours, *sojourns*; a kind of *abiding with* rather than random chance or fanciful encounter. And when we meet, we are both always alone. And strange as it may seem, I have discovered over time that these *sojourns* are almost always precursors for some shift or change, some new opening I am about to encounter elsewhere. There is a theme here for me and it has to do with connections of the most important kind and they feel timeless, like returning to a wellspring one knows so well. I believe we all have special "touchstones" in the arc of our lives: certain people, places, moments, that we come back to again and again within, to true ourselves; centering reference points that have a perennial effect and bring a *scent of the real* as each of us knows it. And if and when we recognize this, taking a step further or deeper, we can start to work with what is generated by these touchstones and discover that this is actually *the very stuff of ourselves*. It is telling that these are the people and the places we find, that in the end *really* matter to us; that yield up the most important kinds of fruit for us, oftentimes in new and surprising ways. For many of us in the Expressive Arts, we know that this insight is a core dimension to the work we are most keen about: with eyes open to bring forth something out of the myriad streams flowing within our experience; something that sings authentic and real and which ultimately can be helpful in our lives and our work. After more than 30 years of learning, friendship, sharing and playing together, it would be difficult for me to identify another person who so compellingly embodies and expresses this notion of "touchstone" as does Paolo Knill. He is a *touchstone* for me in so many ways – pointing towards a way of looking at things - a way flowing with seeming naturalness and lucidity which is almost immediately invoked when he works. He has about him such an atmosphere. I know that many have a sense about Paolo that turns quickly to his knowledge and facility with so many different subjects and ideas; a world of information and concepts uncommonly vast, even astonishingly so; or his artistic and pedagogical skills, quite rare in the fullness and degree of their



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development and refinement; his spectacular musicianship so deep and probing, learned, concise and at the same time free. His music is almost always with a human and humane directionality to it, one that seeks contact and connection with others and pulses with life. I have seen in so many different instances of his work and his working, in his art and in his artfulness, Paolo's sense of balance and form which can be illuminating, his overall artistry quite stunning. But for me, if I were to conjure up as in a haiku, an essence of what he has meant to my life, my growth and my work – including all the attributes that I've mentioned here – I would say that Paolo helps one in *attunement*. How he works and how he is, conjures up a dimension of life and being in this world that has real and intrinsic worth; a way of sensing, seeing and then moving towards that most rare and subtle of human activities; *he helps one to unfold*. I remember in our first contact on the phone, I became aware of his voice, so very deep and full; and as we spoke, the sound almost had a kind of animal warmth, immediate in its effect and quite palpable. It was surprising to be so aware of this feeling in the sound of a person and it immediately caught my attention. When teaching and working, his ability to be present and attentive thru the sound of his voice – his most intimate instrument – was almost always a surprise. Perhaps it has to do with my being a musician, how I became so attuned to the sound – actually, *the sound of the sound* – of his voice and how it would communicate something so compellingly attuned to the moment, the sound of the present making itself known. As a graduate student in the early 1980's, there emerged an archetypal image I still carry within me: a vision quite emblematic of Paolo and his ways. I enter a room and he is already at the piano, eyes flashing and head moving, he is all intensity and focus, flowing and radiating out from him. Sometimes he looks up and glances to see who is entering; sometimes there is a nod, an acknowledgment, a question on his face. But the stream, the flow of what he is doing then, the soundwise diving into some deepening exploration of a theme, a motif; sometimes halting and tentative, sometimes forceful, now gutsy and declarative, sometimes shy, sometimes resigning ... His music not only sets a mood, but almost invariably is an invitation to pay attention to a specific theme or topic within ourselves or encountered elsewhere; a theme for the learning that would soon begin our session that day. The moment is being set, a frame evoked. And after I realized how powerfully the atmosphere of the work to be done could be set in these early days, I came to understand why it might be that he so loves the *tamboura*, the simple stringed, drone instrument usually accompanying me in *sitar* concerts. This seemingly innocuous, even diminutive instrument plucked again and again in a sonically circular movement, creates a curtain of background sounds which to most casual listeners, rarely commands much interest or even attention. And yet in *my* music world, we performers know that these few notes lay out a sonic landscape and topography that serves as an essential tonal canvas upon which my *sitar* weaves the *raga*. It becomes in fact, an anchoring *polestar of sound* which bring to Paolo – and to attentive listeners – a message and an experience of what at the core is really holding the world together, even in a moment of sophisticated, improvised melodic flight. Quite recently, after dinner in our home in Cambridge, Paolo, Margo, my wife Lakshmi (who usually accompanies me on *tamboura*) and I were having one of our wonderful conversations. And Paolo – after so many years – started to focus his attention to Lakshmi's experience of accompaniment, especially fueled I think, by a recent performance of ours at EGS in Saas-Fee. In a way she was completely surprised (although she certainly knows his ways!) at his queries, because in the Indian classical music performance tradition, little attention is played to the *tamboura* player as a central player within a performance. He probed gently but relentlessly: "*What was it like for you?*" "*How did you feel?*" "*What was your experience, your part in the performance?*" "*Was your attention mostly on the soloist?*" He wanted to know, "*Did she feel active, restless, passive, bored?*" He was living in that moment, within a phenomenological net of a wholly new conception of *tamboura*-experience



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and he was *not* going to move from there so quickly! This was not an instance of a sensitive artist paying special attention to detail, or some newly-refined sense of “mindfulness” we were witnessing. It was absolutely classic Paolo, so completely yet lovingly absorbed in wanting to know, *needing* to know; his attention so unwavering with an almost impish delight, fully concentrated on needing to understand for himself the part she played in *his* overall experience of the concert. We were all laughing, marinating in the warmth of our shared attention and experience – a kind of laudatory celebration of a way inwards and how, with respectful attention, *this need to know* can hold and deepen us all. If we really want to know the details of the moment, *we also must know what is holding it*, its foundational moorings, the empty sky upon which the bird paints its patterns ... Paolo somehow always knew the importance of starting out of silence and abiding within a sense of fidelity and attention to this center and always keeping it close at hand. Geertz tells us that “Art and the means for making it are made in the same shop”, so context really *does* matter and *everything* is important in the moment. The *tamboura* really *does* matter, as do most of the other details of encountering another. And so I’ve come to feel how we need to keep this realization quite close to ourselves and let it flow into our work and the world we care about. In my own music, I had found Paolo’s special interest in the workings of the sympathetic strings of my *sitar* unusual, even rather surprising. He often comments on the sounds he hears (and he hears more than most!) that emerge *simpatico, in symphony* with other sounds ..., what these sounds *mean*, what they *do*. I sense this is in part, one of the attractions mood-based music such as the type I work with, is so interesting and absorbing for him. Later on, I came to feel that his attention and genuine delight in my sympathetic strings, really goes quite deeply into something important for him; that is modeled by more than the music itself. How a deliberately sounded tone – directly evoked by a player – can effect a vibratory response *which is palpable, which can be heard, which transcends the initial sound made and which has its own effect*. This is in fact, a metaphor for one of Paolo’s most important talents: he is a master in working with the interplay between individuals and groups. It’s the connections and their effects that have real interest and meaning for him. And I also came to feel that his deep attention to how things affect other things, how people affect other people and how all this is interconnected, is wholly consistent and really an expression of a holistic core at the center of Paolo and his experience and why in part, he is so good in working with others. Paolo’s skill and sensitivity in initiating and shepherding group experiences is in my view, simply extraordinary and almost endlessly creative. During the past 6 months after a span of some years, I have participated in a number of group experiences led by him, both in Saas-Fee and in Cambridge. Drawing from the past, I felt I had a fairly solid sense of ways he might approach his work with a group, but frankly, I was amazed at what I saw, felt and understood in these sessions. The details do not really matter to recount here, but *how* he worked the architecture of the group experience, *how* the process moved thru time and space, *how* both individual and collective experience was attended to (even with upwards of 100 people) was a kind of choreography of human experience quite exhilarating, moving, even inspirational in moments. A world ensemble of human beings in encounter with each other; shifting pairs and groupings in movement, in silence, breathing, coming together, sliding apart; a fugue of human movement and sound, constellating here, breaking off there, centering, dissolving ... I believe we all learned so much then. There is deep wisdom in what he does with groups and viewing him work with such seeming confidence, insight, serenity and precision is a privilege I’ve learned not to take for granted. For myself, I know that early on in my artistic and expressive art training, Paolo’s insights, appreciation and support were all critically important aids in helping me to forge and later follow my own way over the next decades. By the time we first met, he was already well-established and regarded as an accomplished and erudite musician, a remarkable therapist and teacher; a pioneer



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and leader of the Expressive Art Therapies field and was widely lauded for his vision and numerous initiatives around the world. I was a young, rambling journeyman of a musician and psychotherapist, newly hired as Expressive and Music Therapist at a Boston hospital and children's treatment program and was encouraged to seek him out. As for formal training, I really knew next to nothing about the field and was working almost purely on instinct and intuition. With other's urging, I contacted him and he immediately responded to me, a complete stranger to him. Incredulously, he somehow seemed genuinely interested in meeting. We did meet and almost immediately connected, we spoke with each other through the pure currents of feeling and freedom that kindred spirits know and in the ways that art, music and a love for improvisation can bring people to in new places. I became his student. After some years, I moved down other pathways, establishing myself in other worlds with new activities and experiences, away from our initial meeting places. But we never lost contact and continued to meet in all kinds of ways: professional, social and artistic. Once, I described an ongoing concern of mine, a difficulty I was trying to manage, a dilemma to solve. Some from India would compliment me – in their own minds – by offering that I played *sitar* "just like an Indian." I explained what a burden this was for me; how difficult it was as an artist to work out my own individuality with my music; albeit, a traditional music within a culture-specific idiom, one assuredly *not* connected to my own origins or beginnings. And yet, I needed to *play the voice of myself*, not a mimic of someone else's notions or expectations. I had my own reasons for embracing and internalizing this particular art form and they were not the projections others assumed. And as partial response to this state of affairs, when I shared with him the focus of my psychology dissertation – in a kind of *imprimatur* of our ways of working in the Expressive Arts – I described a tentative decision to move somewhat further away from a more scholarly treatment, finally entitling it, "*Finding it as Oneself.*" He listened and nodded his immediate agreement, as if for him there was no surprise in this at all. I had reached a most understandable conclusion and shift for myself. Of course! How *else* could I have approached this? Here again is the theme of *unfolding*: Paolo is utterly devoted to helping one find his own way and gain increasing strength and openings in his or her life. He shares himself with great generosity and with the conviction that we are all able to learn from each other in meaningful ways. While learning, and especially in professional training, it can take real daring to speak to each other in a way that reflects how one is actually being seen and heard, but in our world and work, it is really necessary. And it is not always done with such grace and the kind of light touch wherein a student or client or a peer feels supported and informed; increased and not diminished, with a new sense of things, with new insight, a new way of moving forward. This is the stuff of truly great teachers and I am proud to say, Paolo has been mine.

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