



Peter O'Connor

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First man: 'We've got to stop being fucked over by these people. It's costing too much money.'

Second man: 'Fucking right.'

Third man: 'Yeh, fuck it.'

First man: 'So what I want you guys to do tomorrow is to go into that meeting and in a very unemotional way tell those fucking jerks we're not going to be fucked over anymore. Forget any emotion. Tell them we're fucked off and this is just not on.'

Second man: 'Fucking right.'

Third man: 'Yeh, fuck it.'

EN ROUTE TO MELBOURNE, 10,000 metres up in the air, this seems an uncannily appropriate conversation to overhear before an interview with Dr Peter O'Connor, family therapist, Jungian psychotherapist, explorer of myths and dreams and expert (although he would recoil from this word) on men's anxieties, fantasies, fears and mid-life crises.

O'Connor chuckles when the conversation is recounted to him. How typical, he muses—three young businessmen discussing their work in terms of winners and losers; driven by a need to act at all costs and disguising their emotions with tough talk. 'It's all chest-thumping and posturing,' he says.

It would be an understatement to say that Peter O'Connor is not your average Australian male. (What male is, you ask?) Not because he doesn't love his football and cricket—he does. Not because his work is not important in helping define who he is. It is. Not because he doesn't enjoy the public success that has flowed from at least one best-selling book and many

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others well-received. He does. And not because he doesn't sometimes stubbornly cling to a point of view as if his manhood depended on it. Peter O'Connor, 53, is not, repeat not, a cloyingly sensitive New Age guy.

Rather, he is a man who, through rigorous research, analysis, deep reflection and considerable personal pain and struggle, has made it his life's work to explore the psyche; to chart that territory which links the unconscious to the conscious, the dream world to the everyday world; and, in so doing, to help explain what it is about men, in particular, that causes so many of them to feel—but rarely articulate—such an underlying sense of futility and malaise; and why it is so many of them are in conflict with the women in their lives.

Peter O'Connor sees a lot of men, especially men between the ages of 35 and 45. Many of them first came to him after the publication in 1981 of his book, *Understanding the Mid-Life Crisis*, which has since sold more than 100,000 copies.

The central thesis of the book is that men are all too often at the mercy of their logic and reason, their *logos*. They operate almost always in the external world where occupation remains the cornerstone of their identity. They are compelled to know, to be right, to be pragmatic and in control, especially of their emotions. The result is a severing of their internal life from their external.

Women, on the other hand, are generally far more at home with their intuitive, creative, feeling sides, their *egos*. They are more at ease with life's internal dramas, with ambiguity, with uncertainty. Little wonder, therefore, that so many men feel threatened by women—women symbolise for them a world over which they have little power or control. But it is often only during a crisis that men realise they cannot rely upon their powers of reasoning and logic to provide answers. The enemy, as they say, is within.

Even before the book was out, O'Connor knew he was on to something. He had written an article on the subject for a Melbourne newspaper when he was a university lecturer and the response had been phenomenal. Scores of men, nearly all of them in mid-life, either called or wrote to him with stories that overlapped and resonated. Their relationships had broken down but they had no idea why. Their careers had stopped providing fulfilment. They were happily married, still only in their late 30s, but felt their lives effectively over. They were constantly having affairs but remained dissatisfied. They'd begun feeling jealous of their children—their successes, their youth. And yes, they'd begun contemplating death.

'If there was a general pattern, it was the loss of meaning,' says O'Connor now. 'They realised that what were once goals could no longer sustain them.'

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The response to this was either massive withdrawal—from family, friends, social activities—or manic activity, anything to avoid looking at the inner life. Their social conditioning had led them always to equate action with strength. Now they didn't know what to do.

To O'Connor, however, this uncertainty was the key to the healing process. 'To me, the whole art of that second half of life is to begin to not know,' he says. 'I think our culture mistakenly thinks that knowledge and wisdom are the same things, so it's very hard for men to say, "I don't know."' In the workplace, for example, it's banned.

'Real growth comes in the feeling life, in the inner life, by being able to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity long enough to find out what it is that you need to know. It's what Keats once called "negative capability"—the ability to sustain oneself in doubt and uncertainty without an irritable reaching for reason.'

WE ARE SITTING IN PETER O'Connor's consulting room in a Federation house in Hawthorn. The room is dark, spare and unremarkable. A rag-tag collection of tomes on Jungian psychology, marriage and family therapy line a small bookshelf. On one wall are two da Vinci prints representing two faces of the female. On the mantelpiece above a fireplace that doesn't work is a small statue of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing who healed through dreams.

It is in this room that O'Connor conducts his dream groups, one all-male, another all-female (except for himself), the rest mixed. It is here also that his clients, mostly men, come to see him. It is quiet, and safe, a place to explore deep pain and anguish, a place to examine and move between the visible and the invisible, between the conscious and unconscious.

Peter O'Connor makes you feel entirely welcome. His face is handsome and warm. He looks like a cross between a leprechaun and the American satirist Spalding Gray—a human windmill of hand movements, facial expressions and a body that occasionally shakes and shudders with the merriment of his own self-deprecating humour.

An interview with O'Connor is littered with ingenuous put-downs, like 'I genuinely don't know very much actually' or 'I find [being cast as] the expert terrifying'. He prefers conversation, a meandering journey through life, your life, his life and, naturally, the deeper meaning of legends, myths and folktales.

That's one reason he is so drawn to the Irish—because of their lyricism and their connection to their myths. 'They use conversation to connect

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to each other,' he says. 'They don't actually use it to tell you anything. Anyone who has asked an Irishman for directions will know that.'

Not surprisingly, then, O'Connor would prefer to converse than be interviewed. He is, in fact, quietly petrified about this interview, alarmed at having his cherished privacy invaded, and of the notion that someone else would try to enter his 'foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart'.

It was only after gentle proddings from friends like Michael Leunig, a fellow 'soul detective', that O'Connor saw, reluctantly, the merits of a story like this.

Who can blame him for his reticence? The issues are complex. Dreams, myths, imagination, symbols, the psyche. If you can't do justice to the subject, how on earth can you do justice to the man—especially one as reclusive and deeply modest as this one? According to his wife, Margaret, also a psychotherapist, her husband is where he is today only after years of travelling a solitary path of labour—searching out articles, reading books, exploring myths, analysing dreams, ruminating, reflecting, allowing himself time and space to unlearn and rediscover. 'He is a man who has struggled mightily with his own demons,' she says.

But from these dark places has emerged, she adds, an enormous creativity and capacity to hold opposite sides together, to not rush to one position or another, but, rather, to allow, as Jung did, disparate ideas to coexist. That is the essence of good therapy.

This is—if the truth be told—my second visit to Peter O'Connor, my second attempt at writing this story. I ditched the first in a moment of crippling self-doubt and considered becoming, I don't know, a strawberry farmer. Pride (or ego) got the better of me. But even now, as I gingerly press ahead, I am in the vice of uncertainty—just where O'Connor would have me. It is probably no accident that I am sitting in his consulting room imagining myself in therapy. I am 39, with short (some would say thinning) hair and an easily-dented (some would say vaulting) self-confidence. I have also experienced nearly all the fantasies O'Connor believes afflicts those suffering a mid-life crisis.

I've had the farmer fantasy (minus the toil and sweat of course). I have often thought it would be good to belong to the land, to wake before dawn, to sit by a babbling brook, to get lost in the maw of the bush. O'Connor believes this is simply an expression of an internal desire to cultivate a sense of natural rhythm and freedom.

I've had the 'nurseryman' fantasy, similar to the farmer but related more to planting and growing shrubs and trees. O'Connor thinks this is all about an internal need to be, don't laugh, 'watered, fertilised, weeded and generally nurtured'.

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I've had the helper fantasy—a recurring desire to be in Rwanda or Bosnia or Cambodia, somewhere where my energies can be put to a greater good. An admirable fantasy, says O'Connor and, like the others, to be encouraged. Trouble is that many men (not me, I hear myself scream) indulge in this one when they've sacrificed the well-being of their own families in pursuit of their materialistic or professional goals. What's needed, he says, is reparations with those closest to home.

I've had the writer fantasy (as in the Great Australian Novel) which O'Connor says comes from spending too much time with my logical, rational side, rather than my creative, intuitive side, and I've also had the dropping out fantasy, which I return to each time I sit before a computer screen. Like now.

O'Connor thinks I should wait, listen to the soundings, before I rush to action. This is a time of great stirrings and rumblings, yes, but also reflectiveness and creativity, a time when ambiguity takes the place of high certitude.

IF YOU TRACE PETER O'CONNOR'S background, you could argue that he's always been in the thrall of his own uncertainty. It probably began when he was thrown into a Christian Brothers school in Melbourne in the early 1950s.

'I find it amusing,' he says now, 'that people talk about the Christian Brothers and all this sexual paedophilia. I think it's only the most concrete form of abuse that went on. The abuse of imagination, abuse of feeling and abuse of individuality were really far more profound. I guess what I chose was the rebel path.'

One of his earliest school memories is of being disciplined for throwing salt in a fish and chip shop. He failed miserably as a boy scout and was dismissed for unruly behaviour. Later, he was dishonourably discharged from school cadets for persistent absence without leave.

His academic record was equally abysmal. He did seven subjects for his leaving certificate and failed every one of them. He was a spectacular underachiever and his parents were desperate, so when their son suggested he leave the Christian Brothers, and try his luck as a boarder at Assumption College in Kilmore, they seized upon the idea. Suddenly he found himself free of the cast and role of the rebel. He could give himself over to learning . . . at least enough to pass his exams. But he still didn't quite belong.

After school he dabbled in acting, worked in the public service and then studied psychology and social work at university. It was the 1960s,

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a time when Freudian theory, in particular, was considered the answer to the world's problems.

From university, O'Connor went to work as a psychologist in mental hospitals before eventually taking up the position of associate director and then director of the Victorian Marriage Guidance Council. At the time he'd only been married about two years. 'In those days, there was no real professional training for marriage counsellors,' he says.

In 1971, O'Connor went to the United States on a Churchill fellowship to do his doctorate in marriage counselling. It was the first time, he says, anyone had taken his thinking seriously. His thesis was on triads and whether or not three as a number could work in counselling. O'Connor concluded that it couldn't—it was better for a couple to see two separate counsellors.

'Three replicates the Oedipal triangle in a way that is inherently full of jealousies and rivalries,' he says. 'Inevitably, it splits into a two plus one arrangement . . . and it isn't necessarily the counsellor siding with one person. It can quite often be the couple against the counsellor.'

After completing his PhD, O'Connor eventually took up a position at Melbourne University as a senior lecturer in the social studies department. It was a bad move. O'Connor couldn't cope with the bureaucracy, the rules, the meetings, the petty regulations, the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. He might have appeared successful to others but he felt wretched inside.

'He was exploring the inner life of feelings,' says his old university friend Bill Healy, now senior lecturer in social work at La Trobe University. 'And the more he explored this life, the more he saw institutions as artificial structures built along masculine lines.'

Through talking to friends and acquaintances, O'Connor began to think that his perceptions were shared by other men at similar stages in their lives.

'He [O'Connor] was about the only male friend I could talk to about feelings, or what people would call the feminine part of their personality,' says Healy. 'In the 1970s, it was unusual to find a man who would warmly and readily engage in that type of discussion.'

It was then that O'Connor wrote the article on the male mid-life crisis that was to cause an avalanche of letters and change his life forever. 'I can remember him coming to me saying, "Here's another letter from a bank executive who wants to give it all up and go and grow plants,"' says Healy. The letters were far more interesting to O'Connor than working at the university. He was so embittered by his experience there that he resigned, went into exile in England, wallowed further in his own

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mid-life crisis and, from this, wrote the book that was to be both a catharsis and a best-seller.

Although he swore he would never return to Australia he did so, reluctantly.

IT SHOULD PROBABLY COME AS no surprise that Peter O'Connor is a hit with some very literary women—authors like Helen Garner, Drusilla Modjeska and Carmel Bird. Garner calls him a quiet phenomenon. 'When my second marriage hit a brick wall [in 1985],' she says, 'I thought I better talk to someone fast because everything was collapsing or had collapsed.'

She saw O'Connor every week for nine months. 'It was a very crucial period in my life that turned things around in a very deep way. I expected to go along to him to howl and weep. I went to the first couple of meetings with two clean, folded hankies, but I didn't need them because something different happened.

'It was an intensely exhilarating experience. I thought we would have to trash through my past and dredge up events in my childhood and gruesomely recall things on an event level, instead of which he showed me there was a way of getting underneath and above it.

'We talked a lot about dreams. It just sounds like bullshit when you try to explain it but it was like he taught me another language. It was the language of the imagination.'

Drusilla Modjeska met O'Connor with Garner. She had read his books, he had read hers. They instinctively understood each other. 'I think he is a good angel in this world of such troubled relationships between men and women,' Modjeska says. 'Over the past few years I have found myself in conflict with aspects of masculinity. He has been a kind of beacon and showed that it is possible to be engaged with a man in a non-threatening but exciting way. He has been a reminder of men's strength and goodness.'

Another writer who sings paeans to O'Connor is Carmel Bird. Not only does she admire his courage—for radically changing his career mid-stream—but, more importantly, for the way in which he has allowed men, blokes, to feel okay about discussing their deepest feelings.

'He doesn't deal in facts,' she says. 'He deals in myths, legends, symbols, the unconscious, and I guess what he and I and Helen and Drusilla are searching for is a language. It is a language of the soul.'

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IT MIGHT BE DRAWING A long-bow, but if you ask Peter O'Connor, he'd tell you that the Greek gods have a lot to answer for. To begin with, it was chaps like Zeus and Apollo who immortalised *logos*, rational thought. Zeus, for instance, stood on Mount Olympus like the patriarch he was, throwing off thunderbolts whenever someone disagreed with him.

He treated his wife appallingly. He was so competitive that rather than see his wife give birth to their child, he gave birth, instead, to a daughter, Athena—out of his own head. Talk about creating a woman in your own image! And he did it by swallowing Metis, the goddess of wisdom.

Apollo, the god of reason and knowledge, was little better. His infidelities were legendary but they didn't extend to his lover, Coronis, whom he found was having an affair while pregnant to him. No conciliation there either—he killed her, dumped her body on the funeral pyre and then kept the child.

The feminine, in other words, didn't fare too well in Greek mythology. The world was a vengeful place and knowledge came only from masculine illumination and rational thought—quite unlike the Irish myths, where female goddesses and enchantresses were everywhere (except on top of mountains). Take Morrigan, for example—she was the goddess of nurturing, fertility *and* war.

Now the relevance of this today, of course, is that, according to O'Connor, these Greek myths still inform the way men and women unconsciously relate to each other. Men are still driven by *logos*, they are still programmed to behave like patriarchs, still terrified of being absorbed by their feeling life, still disconnected from their spirit, their *egos*.

It is this conflict between *logos* and *egos* which O'Connor believes is the root cause of men's rage, be it murder, rape, domestic violence, suicide, alcoholism, reckless driving, or just simply sullen withdrawal from the world.

If men attack, or are in conflict with, women in the outer world, they are merely reflecting the conflict within their own psyche towards their feminine selves. 'Men are actually terrified of women because they're terrified of themselves,' he says. 'They're terrified of being swallowed up by women. They're terrified that somehow they'll lose control or that they'll actually get in touch with some feelings when they're with women.'

The answer to the pitched battle between the sexes does not lie, therefore, in men retreating to the forests to beat tomtoms, throw spears and bond with one another. That pursuit of masculinity, he says, only revives misogyny and further debilitates men's capacity to relate to women. 'If there is to be male liberation then it will be born out of the integration and inner union of masculine and feminine, of *logos* and *egos*.'

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Once upon a time there were priests to listen to our miseries. Today there are hairdressers—or people like Peter O'Connor. He would hate to hear it, but in a way he is like a modern alchemist, untapping the blockages, transmuting the baser substances into a higher consciousness, facilitating the path to the lost language of the soul.

As for me, I'm still looking for the path. Sometimes I think it is to be found in the strawberry fields, or in the smoking ruins of Bosnia. Mostly, though, I reckon it is, as Peter O'Connor says, on the *via regia*, the royal road, leading in, not out.

'The outer life of a man merely mirrors the inner,' he says finally. 'Change the internal world of images and the outer world will change in accordance. Badgering males to alter their sexist language and correcting and chastising them for sexist attitudes will draw their attention to the issue, but the change must be an internal one. For men to be liberated from their own oppression, which manifests itself in their oppression of women, they must turn in, not out, and begin the process of restoring the relationship to the unknown woman within.'

Radical? Well, what's more radical than men and women in opposing armed camps? If you're looking for disarmament, you could do a lot worse than take Carmel Bird's advice: 'Send us all to Peter O'Connor.'

Postscript

By early 1999 Peter O'Connor was still working as a counsellor and facilitating his weekly dream groups. In addition to learning Gaelic, he had also just completed a 150,000-word manuscript on Irish myths called Beyond the Mist.

At 56, he said he was now in the last quarter of his life and, therefore, reflecting more on death than ever before, not with a sense of morbidity but with a view to obtaining 'a sense of consciousness before I die'.

Not surprisingly this was translating into his latest research, on the experiences of men and women in their fifties, a subject he was hoping to turn into a book.