Camphill, Community and Research:
an insider-outsider perspective

by Maria Lyons

If we are to bring out the human potential at its best, we must first believe in its existence and presence

Victor Frankl[1]

Camphill, at the moment, is struggling a bit with an 'insider-outsider' complex. Whenever I feel that my input or impressions are in question because I do not sleep, eat and work in a geographical area named 'Camphill', I want to say: I may not live in Camphill, but Camphill definitely lives in me! I had a conversation the other day with someone who said that Camphill should not be expending all its energies on preserving its 'bounded spaces', but rather on helping those who carry it in their hearts to step out of those spaces, to sow the seed in their own way and in service to the needs they find most pressing in the world today. What follows is a brief account of my effort to do something 'out of Camphill', as it were, rather than in it. To do that I have to dip into the story of Camphill's history and development, since my interpretation of what Camphill needs today is bound up with my interpretation of that story, as much as it is shaped by my own biography and interests.

It was in 1967 that Stanley Segal famously proclaimed that not only do those who were then called handicapped children have the right to receive an education, but that they are in fact capable of learning and development.[2] Universal education for those "suffering from a disability of mind" became law in the United Kingdom via the 1970 Education Act. Three decades prior to that date a group of anthroposophists from central Europe, taking refuge in north-east Scotland from the war in their homeland, founded the school for children with severe disabilities that grew into the Camphill Community Movement. The 1948 prospectus of the Camphill Rudolf Steiner School (now Camphill School Aberdeen) pre-empted Segal's affirmation, stating that each child has "the right to demand that he is given all possible help towards bringing his potentialities to fullest expression".[3] Interestingly, the "Camphillers" also pre-empted in many respects the 'language' of *personalisation*, which came even later on in the story of social care policy and politics. The 1948 prospectus informed parents that "each child is an individual, and therefore needs a special and individual method, and not a standard method, which might be enough for the ordinary child".[4] Today, *personalisation* is the name of the game. In essence, the term represents the belief that individuals must be put before systems and processes. It is not services that ought to determine the nature of care and support, but human beings.

Whatever else one thinks of the successes and failures of Camphill communities, one cannot deny that they were pioneering, in the sense that they foresaw and strove to implement an approach to disability that is now widely accepted as a fundamental necessity for liberal democratic society. In fact, if one were to look merely at language – comparing, for instance, the vision statements of Camphill communities with UK government White Papers[5] – one could be forgiven for thinking that Camphill is entirely mainstream. In many respects, it is: Honouring individual potential and actively supporting people to be all that they can be; cultivating reciprocal relationships with mutual responsibilities and expectations; blurring distinctions between 'able' and 'disabled', 'provider' and 'recipient' of care; recognising that people with disabilities have their own unique contribution to bring to the table, and can be treated as equal partners in shaping their environment and lifestyle; understanding that communities are stronger where all members experience that their contribution is

valued, and that they can be of service rather than merely 'served'. These statements, by the way, are all paraphrased from recent policy documents, not Camphill or anthroposophical literature. Beyond chiming with officialdom when it comes to the aims and ideals of care provision, Camphill's very existence is perfectly in line with a key strategic plan laid out by our national Governments: namely, that of ensuring that there is a diversity of 'service models' so that those with disabilities have genuine choices when it comes to deciding on their living, working and social arrangements.[6]

So why then, despite all this seeming resonance, is Camphill so often perceived to be struggling, threatened, put on the defensive in today's political and financial environment? To be sure, part of the reason for this is what might be called an accident − or perhaps the unluckiness − of history. Although it had much in common with other disability rights movements, including an opposition to medicalised care and an emphasis on community, paradigm shifts since the 1960s have left Camphill situated within a category of provision which is seen to be anti-individualist, even opposed to progress. Abuse scandals happening predominantly in state and private residential care facilities have left the general public suspicious of separate, enclosed, or in any way 'special' settings, for vulnerable people. These circumstances have not been aided by the relentless pursuit on the part of political elites of a reform agenda which refuses to explore, let alone take into account, the subtleties of culture and practice which distinguish communities from institutions.[7] It is easy to look for blame in the contradictions and fallacies of political ideology. Indeed, I spent four years of my life doing just that! What drives me now, however, is the question of Camphill's own responsibility. What role have the communities played in creating this predicament and what are the possible routes through and out of it?

Karl König, leader of the founding group of women and men, saw the opportunity provided by Camphill communities to study and understand the nature and needs of children with a wide range of mental disabilities. Over and above that, he stressed the importance of sharing that understanding with professionals, parents and the general public, to help ensure that society as a whole would not fail these individuals in the future as they had done so badly in the past: "…we cannot only build islands, when so much suffering and misery abounds in the big cities and so many parents cannot send their children to us".[8] While Camphill communities have certainly been centres of training in curative education, they have on the whole not realised that vision of communicating their learning and experience to the world. Of course, building communities which offer a home, in its broadest meaning, to people with learning disabilities is in itself a profound social engagement; in that sense, Camphill communities have not been isolated from mainstream society in the ways that other intentional community movements tend to be. Yet they have also been inward-looking, pre-occupied and intent upon establishing their own version of social health and cultural renewal. This, I suggest, is their role in enabling the suspicion with which they are treated. People are at best dismissive, at worst afraid, of what they do not understand. Nor can people, to state the obvious, be expected to reasonably judge – or acknowledge the value – of that which they know nothing about.

It is quite possible that the inwardness and relative 'boundedness' of Camphill communities was a necessary part of the movement's development; that is a topic to debate another time. It is also quite possible that the Camphill movement has changed society simply by being an example of how life can be led differently; by being what Dan McKanan calls a "transformative presence".[9] I am a firm believer in this kind of grassroots transformation. Nevertheless, Camphill can be much more transformative, I feel, by being much more 'present': present, that is, in public, political and professional domains. This is, of course, not a new argument. Due both to internal shifts in attitude and in response to changing external conditions, the last decade has seen Camphill communities markedly increase their contact with the wider communities they inhabit, raising their public profile by forming representative bodies, participating in policy and professional forums and collaborating with non-Camphill organisations.[10]

The presence I am talking about, however, can take many forms, and there is one sphere – what is in *threefolding* terms considered a vital part of spiritual-cultural life[11]; namely, academia – which Camphillers have made little effort to participate in or penetrate. Academia has heard virtually nothing from the Camphill movement over the course of its 75 year history.[12] When I say academia, I do not mean merely the discipline of social care and disabilities; Camphill communities, being so much more than what it says on their local authority registration form, have the potential to contribute to a huge variety of fields of learning, including ecological and environmental sustainability, agriculture, medicine, economic and financial innovation, communal studies, religious studies…I could go on. It is precisely because Camphill is a practical movement – a living presence in the world, carried by individuals steeped in the day-to-day realities and challenges of building community – that it has the power to be transformative in an intellectual world suffering so desperately from a lack of connection to both human experience and our natural environment. And, it is worth emphasising that it is precisely those un-situated theories, those soulless abstractions presently pouring forth from academic institutions that inform the policies that will dramatically affect not only Camphill's but all our futures.

There is quite a lot of talk currently in Camphill circles, and amongst those who have a stake in Camphill's future, of the need for *research*. More often than not, this conversation takes the form of wondering how communities can demonstrate their legitimacy as service providers, how they can *evidence* the quality of their outcomes to local authorities and potential residents. This, I would suggest, is only a small part of what research is about. There is a danger in viewing research in a way that is short-sighted and reactive, in a way that it becomes reductionist, measurement-focussed and thus undermining of the very qualities that might be what support Camphill's claim to offer an alternative way of life. This type of research, I would argue, is not truly in the spirit of König's vision, but arises more out of an impulse for self-protection, self-preservation and perhaps, dare I say it, a slight sense of superiority. It has been my observation that Camphillers can sometimes be over-confident of their exceptionalism, complacent in a feeling of having if not all, then at least the best answers.

A wise former colleague of mine once said that the purpose of research is not to 'prove' but to 'improve'. In my mind, the two are not mutually exclusive: one goes a long way toward 'proving' oneself if one can demonstrate a willingness to 'improve'; trust is cultivated where there is openness, transparency, self-critique and learning. Moreover, the right kind of legitimacy comes about when a clear communication of ideals, values and methods gives more people a chance to get on board out of a sense of shared purpose, out of their identification with a common cause. This is also the root of genuine accountability: being judged by the standards of one's own stated intentions, not someone else's. It is true that we live in times where Camphill must demonstrate compliance with external regulatory criteria as well as fulfilment of its own guiding vision statements. However, it is my contention that the more Camphill and other voluntary sector organisations can show they are doing the latter, the greater their chance of influencing – and eventually, reducing the need for – the former.

I notice that I have been discussing research in the context of three distinct yet closely interlinked questions Camphill communities all over the world are facing: how to foster their inner growth and development as both communities and organisations; how to give proper account to the local communities they serve as education and care providers; and how to continue to engage with their responsibilities as part of a movement for social and spiritual renewal in societies where it is by no means only people with disabilities who are struggling greatly with the loss or absence of a sense of community. I am not saying that research is the answer, it is but one among many answers. It happens, however, to be the one that I am passionate about. Today there are some 120 Camphill places across the globe, having spread from those modest beginnings in north-east Scotland to Europe and North America, and more recently, to Asia and Africa. The expansion, longevity and diversity of Camphill as an intentional community movement are in themselves enough to credit the assertion that here is an enormous wealth of experience and knowledge from which the world could

benefit to a far greater extent than it already does.

It was this belief that inspired me to set up the Camphill Research Network. The Network has a number of short-term practical aims, all smaller steps towards the more far-reaching vision I have been describing. The first step is to collate and build an online library of the existing research on, or relating to, Camphill. These articles, reports, dissertations and books, in a range of languages, will be a resource for people within the movement and those outside looking to study it formally or further their understanding for other reasons. The second step is to facilitate and foster contact between people who are doing or supporting Camphill-related research. There are in fact a significant number of research projects already happening and the Network aims to raise awareness of and share information about these activities, enabling greater international and inter-regional debate, exchange and collaboration. As well as the scope for learning from organisations beyond the movement, there is much more scope for communities and organisations within the movement to learn from each other's varied contexts. Finally, the Network will seek to develop the capacities to initiate further projects and research-focused public events. This may include preparing proposals on how Camphill bodies could work associatively and strategically to organise and fund research in the future.

To end this account of how I am attempting to work 'out of Camphill', in both senses of the phrase, I must confess that my motivations are not selfless. I grew up in Camphill in Aberdeen, Scotland and then spent my years as a postgraduate student studying the concept of community from anthroposophical and other perspectives. Yet I didn't really come to understand what community meant, or experience my own need for it, until I left university and set out to become an 'independent researcher'. Research can be very isolating and I quickly learned that it cannot be accomplished in any meaningful way without a supportive network of like-minded and interested colleagues. 'Independence', in other words, is as much of an illusion in intellectual endeavours as it is in other spheres of life. For this reason, I hope that the Camphill Research Network will sow the seeds for a real 'community of researchers', acting out of a common intention to further the work not only of Camphill, but the great variety and diversity of grassroots and intentional community movements which are striving, in their own ways, to bring about social transformation. That is a community in which I will feel I belong.

New View, Michaelmas 2014

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Endnotes

1. Frankl, V.E. (2000) *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*. USA: Perseus Publishing.
2. Segal, S (1974) *No Child is Ineducable*. UK: Pergamon Press.
3. Costa, M (2008) 'Camphill – An island of promise: myth or reality?' (Thesis submitted for the degree of MSc: University of Strathclyde). Page 33
4. Ibid.
5. *'White papers'* are documents produced by the Government setting out details of future policy on a particular subject.
6. Social Care Institute for Excellence (2008) *Personalisation: A rough Guide*. London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.
7. The question of whether Camphill communities are 'institutions' has been dealt with extensively by Nils Christie. His conclusion was that they are not. A review of this work can be found on the Camphill Research Network website at www.camphillresearch.com.

8. ibid note 4, page 34.

9. McKanan, Dan (2007) *Touching the World: Christian Communities Transforming Society*. USA: Liturgical Press. Page 33

10. I presume, being ignorant of the facts, that these 'outward-looking' initiatives have been occurring at different rates and to varying degrees of success in the different countries and regions where Camphill is active. My picture is very much derived from the Scottish, and to a lesser extent English, experiences. I hope to learn more about the state of play in other parts of the world through the Camphill Research Network.

11. '... threefolding terms...' here refers to Steiner's exposition of his Threefold Social Order, comprising three spheres of independent but associated activity: The Rights sphere of Politics and Law; The Spiritual-cultural sphere which includes art, religion, spirituality, education and therefore also academia; and the Economic sphere.

12. Where it has heard of Camphill, it is frequently thanks to the efforts of highly active external advocates. See, for instance, the enormous amount of work that Robin Jackson has done over the years to draw attention to Camphill documented at www.camphillresearch.com.