

Maurice Dongier 1925–2015

Maurice Dongier had many identities and came to be appreciated by colleagues and friends of many persuasions over his Montreal years. His professional contributions and involvements enriched many areas; in an era marked more by a trend to super-specialization, Maurice provided a refreshing example of how high professional accomplishment can be enhanced on a backdrop of broad curiosity about the world and everything in it. His mind was active and inquisitive, never doctrinaire; tangential excursions were not distractions but often led to enlightened modifications of theoretical or clinical positions. He tackled the difficult issues impeding dialogue between basic scientists in psychiatry and their clinical colleagues, and consistently tried to bridge those gaps.

The breadth of his academic and clinical perspective in psychiatry was impressive. His European psychiatric education ensured a knowledge of neurology, which most Canadian psychiatrists lack; this and many other qualifications led to his selection in the early 1970s as chairman of Psychiatry at McGill University and psychiatrist-in-chief at the Allan Memorial Institute. However, he also undertook a very contrasting path in the exploration of psychoanalysis, and in Montreal obtained the status of training analyst in the Quebec English Branch of the Canadian Psychoanalytic Institute. Arriving in the midst of a Quebec society in a tumultuous identity struggle, Maurice immersed himself and supported others in attempts to bridge the “two solitudes” in their psychiatric and psychoanalytic components.

As much as Maurice excelled at administrative and academic levels, he was always ready to help out in clinical endeavours when staffing gaps occurred. Also, he was careful to acknowledge and express appreciation for all members of the mental health team. He maintained his clinical

interest, always open to new ways of looking at phenomena; in fact, he exemplified a comfortable application of the biopsychosocial model. In the early 1980s, after leaving the chairmanship of Psychiatry, he continued investigative interests at Douglas Hospital as director of research and expanded his research into alcohol addiction. In later years, he continued his involvement with clinical consultation in the Emergency Room and the Outpatient Department, adding to his repertoire such innovative techniques as motivational interviewing. Later, he ventured into an intensive exploration of meditation, whose beneficial applications he had seen around him, and which in his final illness provided an immense source of peace for himself.

Maurice read voraciously and wrote many monographs and journal articles on diverse subjects. He also participated in a variety of professional associations and contributed capably to their organizational activities, including the Canadian Psychoanalytic Society and Institute. Not to be overlooked, Maurice was a fine wine connoisseur, upholding the tradition of his French heritage.

My own association with Maurice began with his arrival at the Allan in 1971, and coincided with my appointment as co-chief of the Psychiatric Consultation-Liaison Service of the adjoining Royal Victoria Hospital. Maurice and his beloved wife, Suzanne, herself also a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, had both already worked extensively in the area of temporal lobe epilepsy while in Liege, Belgium, where Maurice had served as professor and chairman of Psychiatry. With their help and the involvement of others on both sides of “the mountain,” a series of symposia known as *Journées psychosomatiques* came into being and lasted for several years. Maurice and I, from that early time, came to share an association and interest in psychosomatic medicine, psychoanalysis, medical student education in psychiatry, and early iterations of “practice plan” phenomena among the attending staff of the Allan. In the face of societal change, staff departures, difficulty in recruiting staff from outside Quebec, and other uncertainties, Maurice provided the kind of steady attention and leadership that steered the ship through many storms.

The metaphor allows me to make reference to another aspect of Maurice’s achievements that is perhaps not as widely known. I learned of his earlier exploits in mastering the operation of a sailing ship, shared with family and friends, based in Marseille. Another frontier involved the exploration of the skies: he obtained a private pilot’s licence. In typical Maurice fashion, it did not stop at going up “to punch holes in the sky,” as pilots describe it, but in Canada he undertook further training to obtain

his instrument rating, which develops proficiency for safer excursions into bad weather conditions, requiring intensive in-cockpit training and ground instruction.

In the late 1970s Maurice combined his interest in flying with a new venture: flying psychiatrists to service outlying areas, first in Quebec, and then in northeastern Ontario. In the latter case, it was my own good fortune to have the opportunity to resume my own interest in flying, which had been suspended in university days. For the next twenty-four years Maurice and I piloted several different small planes monthly from Montreal to North Bay, where he provided consultation and stimulated research into alcoholism at North Bay Psychiatric Hospital, and I drove to a nearby small town, Mattawa, to consult on the patients of local family doctors. Maurice's organizational skills were much appreciated and led to others extending the model to other Ontario universities, with many psychiatrists being recruited for similar regular visits.

Circumstances, planes, and accompanying colleagues varied over those years, but our general pattern was for Maurice to take the controls from Montreal to North Bay the night before the day of consultation, and I would do the flying on the way back the following evening. Cockpit sharing requires careful planning, checking of weather, communication with air traffic control, and, most importantly, a close sense of mutual trust. We had both obtained our instrument rating, which allowed more predictable flights, but also meant flight at times into some interesting and challenging weather situations. Although final decisions were always up to the "captain," we achieved a comfortable collaboration that allowed us to reach consensus. There was no question of taking unnecessary risks: we shared an awareness of our wives and children counting on our safe return.

Concerning his own family, my wife and I had many occasions over four decades to marvel at Maurice's loving devotion. His dear wife Suzanne was always present in his mind and their accomplished children—François, Pierre, Isabelle and Philippe—benefitted from his close interest and support. Their marriages brought spouses into the Dongier fold, and there followed a new generation of grandchildren that enriched his already well-developed concept of harmony for humanity. Of special note, his own father spent the last part of his life at the home of Maurice and Suzanne and obtained the best of loving care there.

My great good fortune was to work so closely with Maurice as my chief in a professional capacity at McGill, and also to spend many hours in discussion at our dinners together in North Bay. It was a marvellous opportunity for me to explore many areas and to learn from his broad knowledge

of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, medicine, neurophysiology, psychology, philosophy, and, of course, aviation. Many who knew Maurice over the years spoke eloquently at his memorial service about the brilliance and humanity of this man who, despite his personal modesty, consideration, and devotion to others, could reliably rise to the occasion when assertive leadership was needed.

I propose the image of Maurice buckling himself into his favourite Mooney airplane, tucking away some treasured family photos, and verifying his book selection; then, after doing all the required checks, he obtains take-off clearance from the Great Controller of the Universe to enter a brilliant, endless azure sky. We salute Maurice Dongier for his life and contributions and wish him a happy flight into eternity.

Alec Ramsay