

To Be, Not to Appear: In memoriam Rimas Kočiūnas (1953-2026)

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Writing about Rimas, the words that come to mind seem either too flat or too grandiose. And grandiosity was something Rimas very much disliked. Hearing praises, he would smile indulgently and steer the conversation elsewhere or say something ironic. Yet there was no feigned modesty in this either. Rimas was a very real, down-to-earth person, free from any pose, living as close to forever unattainable authenticity as one can imagine.

As a professional, he grew during the years of Soviet occupation. Rimas was one of the first psychologists in Lithuania, while the profession was just taking shape. He did his doctoral research in what is now St Petersburg, a city known for somewhat lesser Communist indoctrination in those times and, psychotherapy-wise, enjoying greater freedom than elsewhere in the Soviet realm. Rimas felt keenly restraints imposed on therapeutic practice by the Soviet ideology and sought alternatives as much as he could (which, by the way, was quite complicated then), including Western literature (and practice) on psychology, psychotherapy and philosophy. Thus, with Lithuania winning back its independence and multiple opportunities and contacts opening up, Rimas actively joined the teaching staff at the psychology department of Vilnius University, later becoming its chair, and was instrumental in renewing old and developing new courses for psychology students. The books *Psychological Counselling* and *Group Psychotherapy* authored by Rimas (later translated to a few other languages) became main textbooks for more than one generation of students in many countries.

Along with that, Rimas soon realised the necessity of specialised psychotherapy training and, together with his colleagues, founded the Institute of Humanistic and Existential Psychotherapy (HEPI) which eventually became the centre of existential therapy community in Eastern Europe, attracting students from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and other countries. During thirty years of activities, this institute inspired more than a thousand people interested in existential psychotherapy. At Rimas' invitation, Birstonas was visited by many existential therapy celebrities, including Ernesto Spinelli, Emmy van Deurzen, Kirk Schneider and many others. Not surprisingly, in Lithuania existential therapy became one of the most popular psychotherapeutic paradigms which is not so common for this school.

The training programme devised by Rimas uses the format of residential seminars of about two weeks each. Even the admission process is not

limited to leafing through papers; prospective students participate in a therapeutic group attempting to build relations, gain and share real personal experience. Held at a small and very quiet resort, involving intensive shared presence, those seminars not only provide for theory and practical skills, but encourage to be real and personal with others, tend to teach or rather inspire existential worldview, which, according to Rimas, is at the core of meaningful existential therapy practice.

And perhaps at the very heart of that worldview, and of Rimas himself, lay a rare capacity to accept another person, in a deep and genuine sense of the word. He might not like what a person was doing, yet at the same time he would try to truly understand who that Other was. Not to change them, not to confront them, not to turn away, but to understand. And often he did understand, indeed, and people felt and cherished this. This, too, was one of the reasons so many people felt drawn to him, one of the reasons so many chose to study in Birstonas.

Being a great fan of group therapy and an amazing group therapist himself, Rimas also designed a group therapy training programme that seems quite original and even unique. Students participate in groups and lead groups themselves, at the end of each day discussing and reflecting on what was going on in detail together with their supervisors. Both students and supervisors later prepare detailed analyses of the group in writing. This kind of training demands a great deal of work from students as well as their trainers, but it does give a lot in return to both, continuously deepening students' ability to perceive and understand group processes.

Having contracted an aggressive form of cancer, Rimas elected to go on living as he had always lived (only interrupted by treatment sessions). He kept seeing clients (many of them!), meeting supervisees, teaching. For those close and near to him, such a stance seemed understandable and perhaps even the only one possible. If you live the way that seems right to you, if you do what seems meaningful, then why, in the face of death (medical prognoses being pessimistic from the very start), should it be any different? Even while working hard, Rimas found time for the things he loved: for jazz, for art, for a glass of wine in good company. And on many of his worries, as well as his achievements, he looked with gentle irony.

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