

John Rowan

## A Growth Episode

One of the most difficult things in the whole growth business is explaining what it is all about. Even the best accounts of episodes in groups (such as the one by Gerry Haigh 1.) leave one wondering about how the person went on afterwards; and even the best accounts of what happened afterwards (such as the one by Carl Rogers 2.) leave one wondering what it felt like from the inside.

What I would like to do here is to piece together a 'complete' episode, from the moment when a problem appeared to the moment when it felt settled. This is presented from the inside; it would be up to someone else to describe it from the outside, since it is what happened to me. I make use of notes, tape transcripts, letters and whatever is available. Short linking passages are inserted whenever it seems to be necessary, in italics. Extracts have been shortened for relevance, and different people might make different decisions as to what is relevant. I feel quite nervous about presenting this, because it is quite personal, but I want to do it anyway.

### EARLY 1972

My experience in the Marty Fromm group. I discovered the heavily controlling self who tightens my throat when I am nervous in certain ways. The person he is controlling is a passive-compliant and very weak self, whose only defence is to say - 'I wasn't going to do anything awful anyway, so I don't know what you were worried about.' The controlling self stays aloof, and only steps in when the weak self looks like stepping out of line.

The most dramatic bit came when Marty asked me (as the controlling self) to pick up the cushion representing the weak self. I became very flushed, embarrassed, laughing nervously, excited, and couldn't bring the cushion nearer than arm's length. I didn't want it to come too close - I wanted to keep it at a safe distance from me. That real disturbance was a new insight for me.

It seems now that my controlling self is very gentle with my weak self because it has little respect or trust for it. So it only gives it credit for what it has *proved* conclusively that it can do. One step at a time. Very safe and sound. And maybe this is why I steer clear of the weak, the ill, the handicapped, etc. Because they remind me of the weak self I don't want to see or recognise. I only want to see or talk about my successful self - my strong self. It can be the male strong self, or the female strong self, but it is still the strong self.

But in the confrontation between the strangling self and the strangled self, I was much more into the strangled self - the strangled self was much more me. And I wanted some of that power I saw in the controlling self.

Is this about wanting to get closer to my father, and my father not wanting to get closer to me? And maybe Big Granny comes into it somewhere too?

*Later in 1972 I took a trip one small part of which, right at the end, was about my wife's face. The lower half of it was soft and sympathetic like the young servant girl in my childhood dream, and I loved it; but the upper half was hard and accusing, like a hawk or a wolf, and I hated it. Then early in 1973 I took another trip.*

## THE ST. VALENTINE'S DAY TAPE

Not all that again please! I couldn't stand all that again. All that flapdoodle. All that ended by turning Neil into caramel custard. And that's only the bottom of her face. It isn't doing justice at all to the top half of her face. It's the top half of her face I don't like, you see. It's all too wolfish, those eyes and teeth and all that - I can't stand all that. But when you come down to that drawsiddle teacups and the draw-me-down old flopsy and all that, that's just great - but that's all the bottom half of her face, you see. And it's only half. I wish I could have half a person. (Crying.) I'd get on great with just half of Nellie. We could have a lovely time. We'd just cuddle up soft and we'd be ever so frumley and frapdoodle to each other. We'd be all tucked up comfy and warm anyway. (Pause.) Why do I want that so much?

(Later)

**But definite feeling earlier in session that my heavy controlling person is a woman. Not my grandmother, but something to do with my grandmother. It seems to be this woman that hates Neil.**

April 1973

The subpersonality which I call Big Granny should really be called Mr. Putdown, or Pure Hate. It is made up of the controlling person I met in the Marty Fromm group, plus a full set of snob knowledge, plus a general desire to harm other people and reject them. Its method of operation is largely in terms of avoiding or withdrawing or being silent, rather than any kind of positive action.

*On the 1 April 1973 I went to my regular co-counselling group, and got into a big thing about getting rid of Big Granny. Punching the cushion didn't seem very effective, so I started kicking it around the room. That seemed very satisfying, and at the end of the evening I felt I had done some damage to Big Granny, and reduced her power considerably. The next morning I got off a bus at the Archway, slipped on the wet pavement, fell, and broke my hip. As I was keeling over, I just had time to notice that I was not breaking my fall. Breaking one's hip is unusual for men of my age, but quite common with old ladies.*

April 1973

Big Granny is a bit like Eric Berne's critical parent . . . And it seems that *maybe* I don't let the Child out because he is too scared and weak. And I feel more and more that I need to get to know my Child, and fight Big Granny and my Father and make it up with Mum *as a child*, and not as an adult, as I've been doing.

**May 1973**

### **THE HATE BIT**

It has been a real torment and a real *lot* of pain going through the realization of how much hate there is in me. To realize that I hated Neil was shattering to me.

I found that I hated virtually all the boys at school. But recently I have been getting into the nastiest one of all - self-hate. The taste of my own throat turned into the taste of evil. My whole head disappeared, and became a raw open throat pointing upwards to the sky. I turned into a cat, and a snake. And the cat was Set or Bubastis - an evil cat, full of hate, like in horror stories by Bram Stoker and others which I read long ago. No wonder Freud believed in the bad-animal theory. I must have started hating early. And I think that breaking my hip was an expression of self-hate. But that sudden release of real energy seems to have done something drastic to the self-hate system. It has got smaller, more in proportion. It has become a small part of the background.

**June 1973**

*At last I got into my child self. Two positive directions from co-counselling sessions.*

(To my five-year-old self:) You're OK - you're actually OK. Don't let them do it to you. You don't have to give up loving them. You can fight them with love. Because you are strong enough.

(To my father:) I gave you that impossible huge fascinating strength which reduced me to two inches high - that all came from me - but I don't want *that* strength - I just want my own real strength.

**December 1973**

Dracula and the evil Natasha - I took the evil into my own life - nobody put it there.

**6 February - TRIP TAPE**

*At the beginning of 1974 I decided to take a trip specifically designed to ask the same eleven questions of all six of my subpersonalities as I saw them at the time. These are the answers of Mr. Putdown.*

Question 7. What are your blocks to full functioning?

Well, of course, the fact that I've got to stay hidden, that's very important. I mean, you can't break your cover, you know - I don't want to break my cover. So that everything I do has to be disguised as good humour, or sex, or intelligent conversation, or point-scoring, or ego-boosting - all those safe accepted things that everybody understands and knows about. But like underneath the coat, behind the little swashbuckling epaulettes and all that. Very difficult. You nearly tempted me out then.

You nearly tempted me out. By asking what where my blocks to full functioning. That was clever. I grant you that that was clever. You nearly caught me out for a moment.

Question 9. What is your approach to the world?

Mr. Putdown's approach to the world is to try to blow it out. And if you can't blow it out, piss on it. If you can't piss on it, cut it off with scissors. If you can't cut it off with scissors, put an old sock round it.

(Later)

It comes back to what I said somewhere along the line. The only way I can avoid Mr. Putdown is to be born again . . . So what is this about being born again? It comes from this wish to be new. But that's one of Mr. Putdown's things - everything being the latest, everything being new. How can I cope with Mr. Putdown? Mr. Putdown is more me than any of them. When I sit down with him it just feels like sitting down with me. How awful. How awful that is. What a thing to say! What a thing to say! Oh, God! Somehow there's got to be a human being in all this. There's got to be a human being in there somewhere.

27 October 1974

In the last co-counselling session with Ruth, had a very powerful experience. Some very early period with my mother. I knew what *real love* was like - picture of baby at breast. But now she was making all sorts of demands - if I did this I would get her love, if I did that I would get it and so on. But I never actually got it - I got some substitute instead. (Here I had a powerful hallucination - my chewing gum tasted exactly like a rubber teat, and I could even hear the typical squeaky noise that a teat makes when you chew it). I was a really good boy, I did all the right things, but I never got that real love I wanted.

And so I made two resolves. One was that I would destroy my mother. I wasn't strong enough to do it myself, so I would invent a monster who would frighten her to death - it was black and vague and huge, and on top it had a really ugly frightening face, and it could move as fast as the wind. That would deal with her.

The other resolve was that I would do what she wanted *now*, while I was weak, but when I grew up, I would do just the *opposite*, and see how she liked *that*. I would do everything she didn't want and didn't like, when I grew up.

These two resolves explain so much. That frightening black monster, that I called Big Granny at first, and which scared me so much - I believe that was *my* monster, that I created!

Letter 19 December

I'm still very much into co-counselling, and getting a lot out of it. I'm just amazed at how weak I always thought my child self was, and how amazingly strong he really was

- laying down decisions and definitions which I am still carrying out now, 40 years later! Under all my apparent flexibility, there is a really rigid hard control which I have still not come to the end of, though a lot has come out. At first I put it all on to my grandmother and called it 'the Big Granny System', as if she had somehow put it there; but it seems to me now that I did it myself. I just put all that power, which was really mine, into other people, and magnified it out of all recognition. That then made it too frightening to own, so there was no way of getting it back!

### 30 March 1975 - BIRTHDAY TRIP TAPE

*There two characters just appeared. They seem similar to the two from the very beginning of this episode.*

Silly Sally and Wicked Walter . . .

**(Later)**

**All those tights and suspenders, all those naughty, naughty. Naughty, naughty snatches of conversation. Between the sequins and the secrets and the suspenders. Brassieres and suspenders.**

You see, ladies and gentlemen, while others have visions of the Mystic Orient, inscrutable dreams of the infinite, our subject, S in the experiment, only ever has pictures of tight bums, and tight suspenders, oozing pudendas, frightfully jolly, frightfully chummy. Frightfully chubby. Cheerful chum chumpney.

All pressed up tight and warm. All those nice warm titties . . .

All these amazing visions of little kissing cunts, cranny fannies, pouting mouting opening and closing, all with such lovely little pouting wouting fanny-fannies. Opening and closing. Lips. Like beautiful little lips, opening and closing. What am I really talking about?

I'm really talking about sucking on that lovely, lovely titty. Sucking on that lovely, lovely titty. Sucking on that lovely, lovely titty. That's what it's all about. That's what it's all about. Swallowing down that lovely titty. Swallowing that lovely titty. That's what it's all about. That's what it's all about. Swallowing that lovely titty. Swallowing that lovely titty. There! Wasn't that worth it? There! Wasn't that worth it, down all the immensity, and all the evolutions, and all the universes, wasn't that worth it? Just to get back to that lovely big hungry voracious titty, with cats and screaming hags and - Oh God! How awful! I can't describe how hateful it is. Can't describe how horrible it is. It's the most terrifying monster you could ever imagine.

It's the most terrifying monster I could ever imagine. (Laughs) It's *only* the most terrifying monster I could ever imagine. No, I can use the imagination of all the others to help me. All the evil and all the horror that all those earth-men could ever help me to imagine. And it's all summed up in that monstrous titty. That monstrous titty that's just waiting to grab me. That monstrous titty that's just waiting to devour me, if only

I'd give in to it. Just waiting to grab me. But I'm not going to let it. I'm going to be too clever for it. I'm going to freeze to death. I'm going to freeze to death. I'm going to be so small and so unnoticeable, and so wrapped up in myself, that no one is ever going to notice me.

(Later)

I had a little memory there of what it was all about. And then it started to go away again. I knew from the very beginning what it was all about. I know what it was all about! I do, I know what it was all about! I really do know what it was all about!! (Cries)

It's about *really* opening yourself up to somebody, and *really* doing it, (crying) and everything else being just substitutes after that (crying) everything just being substitutes (crying).

All that nursery talk was just ways of covering it up. (Cries)

(Later)

Why shouldn't there be a lot of it? Why shouldn't there be a lot of it? I want there to be a lot of it, Goddammit! That's all my first eight million eternities, Goddammit! My first eight million goddamn eternities, when I knew what it was all about. I don't want just to forget all about that, so easily. I had the answer to it all then, you know, much better than I do now. A whole lot better than I do now. (Cries)

I feel as if I have to keep a rigid hold on everything, as if I'm keeping a rigid hold on everything. I'm still keeping a rigid hold on everything. I'm still keeping a rigid hold on everything. That's why I want the *light* on, and that's why I want the *tape* on, and that's why I want the *watches* on, and - I *refuse* to just let go. I talk about letting go, and I tell other people how to let go, but I can't let go. I haven't got the faintest idea of how to do it! I haven't got the faintest idea of how to let go.

(Laughs) here I am surrounded by manuals on it. I've got books on it. I've got manuscripts on it. I've got thoughts on it. I've got everything on it except how to do it. I even know how to do it, but I won't. I won't! I won't! I just *won't let go! I won't let go of anything*. Like that's *my* way of dealing with reality, and I'm going to *hang on* to it. I'm not going to go into any of your machinations, or any of your skullduggery, or any of your stupid sentimental swindling whining craps. Because they are all a con! All a con!! They are nothing more or less than just a con. They are some kind of fix, they are some kind of phony rap. They are just going to lure you out, and then they're going to *do* you! They're going to shoot all over you! (Cries) They are just going to wait for you to open up and come out, and then they're going to shoot all over you!! **THEY'RE GOING TO SHOOT ALL OVER YOU!!!** Trample all over you, and tread all over you, and put blood all over you, and scratch you to pieces. Scratch you to pieces in every way. In every conceivable dripping, horrible way! Whatever that is. Whatever you can imagine. Whatever other people can imagine,

whatever the Universe can imagine, whatever anybody can imagine.

(Later)

**You just rush from one extreme to another. It's all kind of sentimental slop, or it's total hate. I'm sure there must be something else, other than sentimental slop or total hate. Must sort that one out.**

**10 April 1975**

In the session with Beverly, wanted to follow up Easter trip. Started with Silly Sally and Wicked Walter.

Silly Sally *very* soppy and nice. Didn't develop into anything.

Wicked Walter . . . gradually got into birth thing. Didn't *want* to be born, said - 'NO! NO!' Wanted to get revenge for having been born - it was the *worst* thing that anyone could do - to take you out of that nice warm womb into all that pressure and discomfort. (*Very strong impression of pressure on head at this point.*) It was most important to remember that it was mother who had done it - *must* get revenge on her.

At some point this connected up with getting revenge for losing the breast, or not having it when I wanted it; and with losing that first Mother's love, or not getting it when I wanted it. (*All these connected with the feeling of 'that's what it was all about' mentioned in previous extract.*)

Went through whole big catharsis on this, very powerful, leaving me lying down exhausted but whole and centred. Beverley said - 'Let an image come into your mind.' My reply:

There is no image, it's just grey. Grey all round in every direction, and the ground is grey too. It's all grey, all round. (Pause) Now it is like a dome. A plain grey dome, very big and covering the whole area where I am lying. I am lying in the middle of a grey plain and the grey dome is covering the whole.

Beverly said - 'Be the dome'. I said:

I am protecting him. I am looking after him. I love him. He's done all these stupid things, but he's *all right*. He's made some stupid mistakes, but they are the kind of mistakes that *anyone* might make. He confused the womb with me, and he confused the breast with me, and he confused Mother's love with me - but it's *understandable*. All the time he thought he'd lost me, I was there all the time, and I always will be there.

Beverly - 'Go back to being you. Did you hear that?'

Yes. (Crying) It's all true, I know now. What a waste! (Crying) I didn't need to blame my mother, or get revenge, or create my monsters, it was all a mistake! It was all a waste! It was all a misunderstanding.

Beverly - 'Now be the dome again. Does his behaviour hurt you?'

No, it doesn't hurt me. I *care*, but I don't *mind*. I don't add to his bad feelings by having bad feelings myself. But I do really care.

We finished up by resolving to remember the dome every day. To make some time to slow down and remember the dome.

It seems to me that this puts together so much, and brings this whole episode to an end - the whole business that started with Big Granny. It was all about destroying my mother, and now I don't need to destroy her any more!

And now maybe the whole thing about being *either* sloppy *or* hateful can just dissolve. I really hope so, and think so.

I feel so good.

It seems to me that this fits very well with the idea of the transpersonal self. The dome felt as if in a sense it was me, but it was also more than me. It couldn't explain itself, because I could only understand in pictures, and no picture could get it right. But it seemed exactly like what I understand of the transpersonal self.

*This is presented as a protocol - an unadorned statement of what actually occurred. It seems that it could be explained in terms of various theoretical frameworks. I can recognise a touch of Melanie Klein here, a trace of Otto Rank there, and some Assagioli at the end. But that is not really the point. The point for me is to show that heavy things can be worked through, and are worth working through. A subsidiary point is that it needn't cost very much: this whole episode was mainly done on co-counselling plus two or three trips, and a lucky visit to a friend.*

## References

1. **Gerard Haigh.** *The Residential Basic Encounter Group*, in Herbert A. Otto & John Mann (eds) *Ways of Growth*, Pocket Books 1971 (Grossman 1968).
  2. **Carl R. Rogers.** *Encounter Groups* (Chapter 5) Penguin 1973.
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