

Stay With The Process

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I have known Ruth M (I realise with a jolt) for twelve years, since she was fourteen. Like most counsellors I have had my share of both 'success' and 'failure' in my work — but I want to talk specifically about Ruth, partly because the duration of our relationship provides a good long view, and partly because she has probably infuriated me, inspired me, rejected me, cast me down to the depths and justified my faith in human nature more than anyone with whom I have ever worked.

We first met when I was a social worker in a deprived area of Scotland, heavily involved in child care. I was aware of and discharged my statutory responsibilities, but I also felt very strongly that my main work with young people was to make real relationships with them (a large part of which involved years of greasy teas in children's homes): to help them to grow, mature, understand themselves better, make positive decisions for the future, and perhaps even to begin to trust the world again, for in all their lives the adult world had grievously let them down.

Ruth was from a poor background, the middle child of seven children ranging in age from twenty to nine, whose father had died when they were all young. Her mother took to drinking and was in a state of advanced alcoholism when I became

involved with the family.

I first met Ruth when I visited her house to do a Children's Hearing report. She had scarcely been to school for the previous three years. The door opened and a small, skinny, perky-faced, long-haired elf answered the door. 'What d'you want?' If I had known what lay ahead I'd have run ten miles. It became apparent that 14-year-old Ruth was looking after her three younger sisters, one of whom was mildly mentally handicapped, in an environment of extreme physical squalor and complete emotional neglect, since Mrs M had by this point abdicated all responsibility for her children.

I was involved in taking the four girls into care, and later in the local authority's assumption of parental rights following their mother's death. The M girls were my cross for the next three years — a bunch of real characters, the vicissitudes of whose behaviour would have made Genghis Khan take to his bed with a hot water bottle.

I grew to respect and admire Ruth, as did everyone who knew her. She had qualities of courage, determination, loyalty, and honesty — these sustained her through very harsh experiences, including her mother's death, rape, then the death of Mary, the kindly middle-aged

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cook at the children's home with whom she went to live at her own request when she was sixteen.

As I planned and worked and liaised, got to know the children's home staff and her sisters and the rest of the family and fought the bureaucracy to keep all the girls together, Ruth became more and more alienated from me, though at first she had tolerated my intrusion into her life reasonably well. She never would allow me to cuddle her, or even put my arm round her (eventually I was allowed to kiss her cheek at her twenty-first birthday party). She would frequently dodge out the back door of the home as I came in the front. She would barely speak to me even when important aspects of her future had to be discussed. It became apparent that Ruth needed a *bad object* on whom to dump all her unexpressed and unresolved feelings of grief and anger, and I was it.

I got on well with all my other kids in care — I worked hard for their trust and affection. But try as I might with Ruth, she continued to treat me with barely disguised contempt. However, I persisted, despite my ever-present feelings of failure. I wrote good job references for her and let her see them. I made my respect and appreciation of her qualities clear in any reports I had to write, which she always was given to read. She was unresponsive in the face of any positive feedback I gave her — and wouldn't respond at all if I tried to raise difficult issues. She certainly gave me a hard time.

Eventually I left the area for a job in psychiatric work — after three years of that setting in general and Ruth's family in particular, I felt a psychiatric hospital was just the thing for me! The grapevine

kept me sporadically informed of Ruth's fortunes. I found out that she had left care and was living in a small block of housing which also offered group tenancies for ex-psychiatric patients. Visiting a client in group housing one day, on my way out of the block I passed a door with 'Ruth M' on it. Could this be her? Apprehensively, I rang the bell.

There she was — same pixie face, short hair now but looking no older than when we had first met five years before. I had no idea what to expect, but she invited me in and we had tea. 'Why don't you call back the next time — it's not bad to see you after all!' I called back on several occasions over the next couple of years. Ruth was going from YTS schemes to temporary work, trying hard but very much a victim of the difficult employment conditions for young people which prevailed at the time. She also seemed to be seeing a lot of David, a care officer in the home she had been in, and the one person she would talk to during those difficult years in care — but she never volunteered the nature of the relationship, although I knew he was now unemployed and separated from his wife and child.

One day she said 'You know, Whitty,' (her abbreviation of my surname) 'I realise what a bad time I gave you years ago. The care staff felt really sorry for you. But I can see now that you were a help to me, although I didn't realise it at the time . . . it was really important to me that you fought for us . . . and that you didn't turn your back on me. I suppose it gave me a bit of a feeling that things might turn out OK after all.' Then she abruptly changed the subject, and that was that.

I attended her twenty-first birthday

party and was hailed by her monstrous regiment of sisters, much as if I was a favourite old pet they hadn't seen for ages. It was oddly comforting. Shortly after this, Ruth called me at home. 'Whitty, I'm in trouble. Can I come and see you?' She had never asked before. It transpired that she had been having a sexual relationship with David, had been baling him out financially from her meagre earnings and benefits, run up a total of nearly a thousand pounds of debts and was about to be evicted. She was as near despair as I had ever seen her.

That day was an important turning point in Ruth's life. We were able to work out strategies to help her begin to sort out her problems at a practical level — but the key issue was that she was able to make a moral choice which enabled her to release her sterling personal qualities to work for her. She was very tempted to 'do a runner' which is what the rest of her family usually did in a crisis. But she decided to take personal responsibility and fight to sort things out.

Within the next two years she paid off all her debts to the last penny. She disentangled herself from David. She got and kept a steady job as an assistant in an old people's home. She decided that she was being too available for her family to lean on, and that it was time to leave the area. I used some old social work contacts in another region to get her an interview for a job, which she got. Four years ago she moved to live in a small country town.

She is now working as care officer in an old people's home, and this year may do some Highers and apply to do her training. ('See how you used to nag me about

my Highers, Whitty? Waste of time! I'll do it when I'm ready.') She lives with a middle-aged couple who have come to regard her as their own daughter. She is engaged to a kind man who cares deeply about her. She has realised the dream she used to have as a child in care — she has learned to drive and has her own car. She is very much her own woman, and I can see that she likes and respects herself.

I don't see Ruth very often now, but I will be going to her wedding. And I get regular letters which usually begin 'Dear Whitty, you'll never guess what these sisters of mine have been up to . . . better get yourself a large whisky . . .'

My long experience with Ruth does continue to influence me. My mind goes back years and I have a clear image of myself running through the back streets chasing her. I had just had to break the news to her that Mary, her befriender and landlady, had died in the night. I never found Ruth that day; I went home that night, and wept bitterly. It had been one of the worst days in my working life.

Ruth more than anyone has taught me the importance of staying *with* the process, being patient, taking the long view. She has also taught me the importance of the times when you give because your gut tells you it's right, even when you can see no return at that point. She has also vindicated my belief that there are times in your life when having someone who believes in you, even when you don't believe in yourself, and who supports you without judgement or recrimination, can be more important for you than they will ever know.