

What Happens When the Train Arrives at the Station?

A personal look at therapy training

Tony Dougan

I completed my training in December 1997. A door came down behind me at the end of the final weekend, you know, like in those gory horror films, old oak, studded with iron, slugging into the floor — slam! Ahead be monsters! I feel a need to say a bit about the last four years, and since I found myself struggling with articulacy, well breath actually, at that last weekend, I thought a little essay might be just the ticket. I mean at the last weekend on that last day I found it so hard to sit in that space. I just wanted to run out of the room. I guess I just thought, it's all over. It filled me with a kind of dread.

I also find, as I was saying to a friend the other day, I am not a fully self-actualised human being yet either! People do not nudge each other as I walk past and mutter 'Jeez what a sorted-out guy'. I am not approached at parties by people who want me to know that they find me just so . . . at ease with myself. I mean, if they did, what would I do? Come to think of it I don't go to parties. My hairmass continues to shrink in inverse proportion to my waistline and I

still sometimes find myself by turns awkward, stammering, and worst of all, needing to impress. It's not that I expected to become one of those floaty, tanned, Californian tantric types, but neither did I expect to continue my metamorphosis into Rab C. Nesbitt! So does this lack of perfection mean I should ask for my money back? I mean I could have a week at Disneyland Paris — no shit — and some left over for a state-of-the-art wood-burning stove and full-suspension mountain bike. As I say to my son — Iwannawannawannawanna!

The main thing I feel is that I really miss my training group. I really miss that heartspace — that safe space. It was tribal. It was belonging to something. I had a bad time when the group finished. I mean a major bad time. My body decided the rest of me was getting a bit uppity so I kind of decided to give myself a mini nervous breakthrough. Do you remember that joke about the various bits of the body arguing who's the boss and the arsehole says 'I'm the boss!' All the rest of the body falls about laughing so the arsehole gets mad and

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closes up. Within days all the rest of the body is falling apart so they elect the arsehole boss. Well that's sort of what happened. This me was wandering round going yeah . . . um . . . sure . . . let's hold on to that thought . . . yes actually I'm a therapist now ha . . . no it hasn't changed me at all . . . neo-reichian's the game . . . transpersonal tony's the name . . . Then body decided that the cosmic wind that had just blown through the front door had not been noticed, so decided to express what the wind of the universe feels like. To me it was a bit like standing under one of the rockets at Cape Kennedy with somebody blowing the biggest didgeridoo in the world right into my heart. Wow is that scary!

I thought for a brief time there I might be dying, and the more I fought that thought the worse it got. Till it felt as if my brain was about to burst out of my skull. At night I couldn't sleep because my heart pounded against the walls of my ribs like Atlantic surf. Ka-boom! Ka-boom!

At any moment I could've just burst into tears. Boo-hoo-hooing but for what? I would look into mirrors and find myself saying 'Jesus Tony get a grip man. I mean this is embarrassing.' Big liquid eyes would stare back at me red-rimmed and red-crossed like some stoned bereaved albino rabbit. Chaotic constellations of tears. Boo hoo hoo! I went to the doctor. She stared at her computer and I stared at her ear, noticing what a weird organ it actually is. I was trying to tell her I was dying while struggling with the evolution of ears. Sonar, radar, clicks, passes, bats, dolphins, vibrations. If you have ears to hear . . . A nurse built like a Russian wrestler and with the face of a concentration

camp guard took blood from me. Maybe it was a virus? Her touch was as soft as a baby's. I wanted to climb on to her large ample breasts and snuggle down till the new millennium. How can you ask for something like that? 'Er, I know I look like an adult but I'd just like to be your small child for a couple of years . . . I mean I'll pay. OK, OK, I'm going, put the gun away!'

I had to stop reading novels because they are too full of pain. I know it sounds worrying but I now only read gardening magazines — *Gardeners' World* is my favourite. Even soap operas are too full of raw, untrammelled emotion for me now, so all I watch are, yes, gardening programmes and of course those interesting series about decorating your house to make it look like some penthouse log-cabin thing owned by one of the Borgias. The good doctor recommended I see a Community Psychiatric Nurse, to which I reacted with 'Is she a qualified counsellor?' I left the surgery followed by a fantasy of young psychiatrists falling over each other to give me ECT. All the lonely psychiatric wards I had ever visited as a social worker came rushing back to me and I saw myself shuffling around in a dressing-gown cadging roll-ups from visiting dignitaries. My rock-climbing buddy is a CPN. When I told him about the doctor I said 'I mean really . . . me . . . fancy referring me to a CPN!' He looked at me, I felt, diagnostically. 'I mean, I'm a therapist,' I added, weakly.

One woman remarked upon hearing of the completion of my training, 'Oh, you're a shrink, then?' I fancied I saw a fearful respect in her eyes. Perhaps she even desired me as a purveyor of dark secrets. Yet I did not dissuade her from the appella-

tion of shrink, and for a bleak moment hung on the flapping coat-tails of psychiatry. Indeed I feel I may have been shrunked, so perhaps I am a shrink. I shrink therefore I am. I remember smiling at her without apparent condescension and replying with those awful words 'Well actually . . .'

I remember my first client. Do we all remember the first time? I rushed around patting cushions and making sure the kettle was boiled, listening for a footfall, for the doorbell. Placing my pen and notebook somewhere discrete and staring into the mirror trying to mould my expression into something ethereally wise and compassionate yet also hawklike-focused. The facial architecture of my dream guru bodhi therapist. Yet it is not possible to sit throughout an entire therapy session with one's cheekbones sucked in. The effect, I learned, was to make me look constipated rather than concerned.

The client didn't turn up and I sat in the empty room wallflower alone, simmering in a soup of self-pity and outrage. A state, as it were, of enforced therapeutic virginity. Anyway I went to see the CPN, a lovely woman who wanted to train as a therapist so I gave her some career advice, solution-focused, of course! She pronounced me sane as a sixpence which I considered a somewhat risky diagnosis but in truth I was

on the mend. I even put my earring back in and bought some suitably therapeutic ethnic print shirts and forgot about Death stalking me, the ultimate Repo Man. But I'm left with a few nagging doubts. I don't like candyfloss, it's too sweet and gets stuck in your teeth, there's too much of it around in the therapy world. And too many maps to the emotional heartlands seem based on wish fulfilment rather than bold exploration and intelligent judgement. And what about the Political Heartspaces and the Community Heartspaces? There are too many therapists staring up each other's bottoms for my tastes.

There's a phrase to conjure with! Look at the whole registration/accreditation racket. Build your house of bricks, indeed, my friend. No, perhaps I shall stick to my gardening and DIY. You know where you are with flowers and wood. You know your enemy. When eventually I do get invited to parties I can still enjoy that frisson up the spine when I say, 'Well actually baby I've got my foot in this big pie called p-s-y-c-h-o-therapy.' Hopefully this will elicit further admiring enquiries and if they ask what I got out of my training I shall reply with complete seriousness 'A love of gardening and an interest in interior decoration.' Then again I could go on another training. You know, that last training to Georgia.

