



GOLLUM'S CONCRETE OVERCOAT

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When we were exploring psychosynthesis in last year's cohort of post graduate students in emotional education at Atlow Mill, I learnt an enormous amount about myself through the discovery, identification and awareness of what I would later call my 'Gollum Concrete Overcoat'.

Many people will recall Gollum from J.R.R Tolkien's trilogy, 'The Lord of the Rings'. In this story Gollum is depicted as being a monstrous creature that had degraded from the most innocent and gentle of creatures, Sméagol. This fall from grace occurred through his possession of the 'One Ring' and, through years under the ring's evil influence, his demeanour solidified like concrete around his very heart.



About three years prior to embarking on the course, my life had hit rock bottom. My wife and I had separated, not an easy situation for most people. When it happened to me, I struggled immensely. I guess I was depressed. I skipped work and spent long hours alone duvet diving, suffering bouts of melancholy, and thoughts of suicide. Eventually, I clawed my way out of this darkness, inspired in some strange way by my children. I recall a counsellor

saying 'you can't commit suicide because of the impact it would have on their lives'. Paradoxically, this selfless act was perhaps the start of the rebirth of my true self.

My birthing process continued when I attended a couple of courses at Atlow Mill, which in turn led to the enrolment on the Post Graduate Certificate in Emotional Education (PGCEE). I believed the course would cover similar ground to those short

weekend courses, but in more depth. What I did not or could not envisage was the sheer impact on me that would be brought about by working experientially within a group of people over nine intense weekends of an academic year.

During the PGCEE I began to focus on who I was and how I'd arrived at where I was. The marital separation was in Mary Maine's attachment terminology 'a life changing event'. In my own self analysis in the context of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory I was 'insecurely attached'. Yet still deeper the PGCEE forced me to go. My insecure attachment patterns were a 'cause' for me to get involved with my wife in an attempt to meet the attachment or deficiency needs not met as a child. Throughout the first few weekends on the course, I heard stories of mal-attachment by neglect abuse and abandonment which held a deep resonance for my own upbringing.

Was my childhood really that bad? How difficult it is to apply a ranking to something as subjective as 'badness'. For it's not the ranking that is particularly important but rather the impact on the developing psyche of the child. Yes, and I had been impacted. I had been wounded as a child. I'd been abandoned and was, to use the phrase Bradshaw coined, 'a lost child'. Again, this was not just physical abandonment, even though my parents had divorced when I was four and I had very little contact with my father. This abandonment was an outcome of their divorce. In the 60s divorce was still taboo, and I took on and

internalised some of the shame of this. I also experienced a whole lot of embarrassment around growing up in a single parent family: free school uniforms, free school dinners and being housed on a council estate.

According to Bradshaw, when you are four years of age the world is magical and you have ultimate reliance on your parents for survival. So, how can they be wrong; it must be something that you do that is wrong? It seemed as though in my parents' divorce, and the effect of that, that I was wrong, even evil, to have such a bad thing happen to me. Bradshaw called this splitting process the development of the 'false self', deriving from toxic shame. For me, this is probably the development of my Gollum sub-personality, the first psychic entity deriving from the shame which does not belong to you but which must be hidden; the corruption of the innocent. In protecting the family secret, the innocence over time is lost and so Sméagol becomes Gollum, and I became the person I was never meant to be. How many others out there have suffered a similar fate I wonder?

In Tolkien's third book, *The Two Towers*, Gollum is described as having two distinct personalities: the good 'Slinker' for his sycophantic, eager-to-please demeanour; and the bad 'Stinker' which looks to sabotage at every opportunity, and where both struggle fiercely with each other throughout the tale. It seems to me that these Gollum-like entities are endemic in many of us. The saintly one, who so wants to make amends for being the 'cause', and the malevolent

one who acts out of the 'cause' because there is no salvation, and therefore one may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb.

These entities are like The Gremlins in Joe Dante's film who, when soaked in water begin to proliferate other Gremlins. When soaked in the water of life we begin to breed more sub-personalities in order to survive other distressing periods and experiences. I have discovered that in certain situations I seek to please with my Artist, my Peter Perfect and my Good Boy personas, and to repel with my Mr Angry, Arrogant and, of course, my Gollum guises. Ferrucci (1982) states that 'Each of us is a crowd, each with its own character which can be far from being at peace with the others. Assaggioli posits

'We are not unified; we often feel that we are, because we do not have many bodies..., and because one hand does not usually hit the other. But, metaphorically, that is exactly what happens within us. Several sub-personalities are continually scuffling ... in an unceasing struggle.'

As subsequent PGCEE weekends elapsed, my sub-personalities came more and more to light in a process that Ferrucci calls 'identification'. Each sub-personality's character became more known to me: their mannerisms, behaviours, feelings, words, shapes and beliefs. Particularly difficult for me was one that I came to call 'Withdrawn'. Due to the sometimes painful group dynamics and intensity of the

course material, I would find myself becoming distant and quiet, struggling to relate in even the most basic interactions. This was a rigid constraining sensation. It was almost as if concrete had been poured over me and was slowly setting. My sensory perceptions become dulled. I could hear words but they were muffled, and could see people gesturing but saw them through a haze like heat vapour shimmering on a stifling hot day.

I recall a particular dynamic I had with a member of the group around not taking accountability for my behaviour. Before realising it my 'Withdrawn' sub-personality had taken charge. I wanted to get out. I wanted to run but I was immobilised. If I had run I'd be found out for the fraud I was. If I stayed I would still be found out. What was my crime that I appeared to be on trial for? Yes, some of my behaviour in the group was not right. The sub-personality lacked sincerity and this was picked up by the group. However the insincerity was not an attempt to deny the allegations, but a shield for the internalised shame of my childhood. In encountering a group with so many vigorous and rational lines of attack (as I perceived it) my concrete defences almost crumbled. I was becoming vulnerable and scared. The true self was emerging and in its inexperience there was no place to go.

As Krishnamurti stated,

'Only in relationship can you know yourself, not in abstraction, and certainly not in isolation. The movement of behaviour is the sure guide

to yourself, it's the mirror of your consciousness...its content ... images ... attachments ... fear ... loneliness ... joy and sorrow. Poverty lies in running away from this ... ' (Bond 1993).

I believe that the same can apply to the identification process. An inner dialogue can ensue between the self and the sub-personality which reveals more about the sub-personality, its character and its purpose in the survival of the individual. But for Ferrucci identification was only part of the process. Being able to identify the sub-personality that has you in its grips is not too much use if it's leading you to behave inappropriately. As with my example of 'Withdrawn', knowing I was in its grip still didn't enable me to articulate adequately, and hence suspicion may have arisen in the group as to my integrity and authenticity.

The next step in the sub-personality process is to be able to 'dis-identify' from the sub-personality role. Underlying the Withdrawn personality was the fear of being found out and beneath that was the fact that deep down I am vulnerable. This fear had encased me in a concrete overcoat, a coat built out of a need to contain the shame, to protect me because of my upbringing. Like Gollum, who tries to protect 'the precious', had these protective strategies made me hideous?

Inside the Withdrawn sub-personality I am alone. Wallowing in my own Withdrawn self pity... 'My precious., we're okay..., my precious.' Or in my Mr Angry

mode, you'd better keep out or you'll get it...'It's my precious..., you can't see it..., I'll look after it'. Maybe it was the course, the tuition or maybe something in my higher self, but I realised that I'd neither have to be Withdrawn, angry or hideous anymore. I'd take my mental sledgehammer and use the anger of a lifetime's imprisonment ... I pause ... fear and doubt still holding their sway ... I **WILL NOT HAVE THIS!** I **WILL NOT HAVE THIS!!!** And so I started to chip away at the concrete overcoat.

Ferrucci wrote that this act of will shows that 'we can truly and freely choose, bearing the full responsibility of self-determination. It is to this evolutionary acquisition, still very much in development, that we give here the name of will'.

I suppose in essence that it was during the PGCEE course that I became aware that I could be self determining. I could choose to recognise and 'dis-identify' from parts of my sub-personalities, this being the process of Psychosynthesis, and the premise that nothing is meaningful as long as we perceive only separate fragments. Assagioli concurs that 'psychological pain and imbalance are felt when inner elements exist unconnected side by side' (Ferrucci). When these elements are balanced, then the emergence of the will takes place and self determination can be found. The task Assagioli sets for us is to gain a pure experience of the personal self through synthesis of the different parts.

According to Ferrucci, this state of personal self 'not only liberates us, it also integrates'. We are liberated or regulated out of the behavioural pattern of that sub-personality but we are still able to strategically utilise that personality, now with consciousness, when we may otherwise be feeling too vulnerable. Or we may want to 'elevate' the negative trait of the personality back to its higher quality, as Jung (Bond, 2006) asserts, sub-personalities are degraded archetypes or higher qualities. Thus, pity can become compassion and anger can

become elevated to principles of assertiveness or creativity.

So it was through the PGCEE that I continued my rebirth and liberation of the personal self through awareness of my sub-personalities. I now no longer look upon myself as being flawed and can sometimes rejoice in those events that made me feel ashamed and embarrassed, so that I can consciously dis-identify from the related sub-personalities. On really good days I see my Sméagol appear wearing a light summer jacket, and if one looks really hard a piece of concrete can be seen hanging from the lapel.

References

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Mark Crowfoot's interest in psychology began while attending one of the short courses at Atlow Mill. This then led him to enrol on the PGCEE and to embark on an Open University Psychology degree course. His continued interest in Emotional Education then saw him joining Atlow Mill Centre in 2006 as a Programme Co-ordinator, allowing him to utilise the skills he learned from the PGCEE course.