

'Where do you go to, my lovely?': reflections on attempts to work with a traumatised child.

Jean Bond

These reflections were written after an encounter with a fourteen year old girl on a recent programme of Emotional Education held at the Atlow Mill Centre in the Derbyshire Dales. This child was taken into care after abusive treatment by her family which left her traumatised and deeply distrustful. Her carers could not get her to communicate and were on the brink of referring her to a psychiatric unit. It is an attempt to demonstrate the difficulties (both psychological and institutional) that face anyone working with severely traumatised young people.

'I want to get inside your head - yes I do!'

She slumps in her chair, scowling, eyes averted, hostility emanating from her as tangibly as a naked sword. Each question or enquiry, no matter how loving or gentle, meets an impenetrable wall of distrust, fear, antagonism. How do I reach you, my lovely? How do I get you to even look at me?

What prompted you to retreat behind this wall of hostile, impenetrable silence? Was it that you were promised help if you told people what had happened and then, when you did, you were taken away from all that you knew and were familiar with, dangerous and desperate though it was? Is that

why you incarcerate yourself in this painful and isolated place? I reach out to touch your hair, soft and alive, pliable, vulnerable - the only part of you that is at this moment. You hiss - 'get off me- don't touch me - leave me alone'. How well I know that place you go to. How many years did I hide in that dark fortress, isolated, desperate for love and too afraid of it to come out. How often do I do it now, when all I need to do is reach out and say, 'I am afraid, hurting, lost'. Too dangerous. The power of someone's love may open up the wounds of inadequacy, powerlessness, badness, leaving me defenceless to the pain of it. So I look at you and you are me and I am you. I feel

your pain - and my pain and I want to liberate you - and me.

Knowing me, knowing you.

A myriad of emotions go through my body, frustration (anger there), impotence, despair, failure, hopelessness. I'll never be good enough, never get it right. You have defeated me and in this moment you could become the enemy. I could arm myself with my anger. I sit and watch you - and myself. Slowly I begin to realise that in sitting there, all your energy devoted to resistance and defence, you are revealing yourself to me without saying a word. You are not telling me how you feel; certainly not. You are telling me 'It's none of your business how I feel; none of your business what has happened to me'. But you are making sure that I know how you feel. The feelings I am experiencing through your total blocking of my efforts to reach you are your feelings also. You are letting me know what it is like to be you. There is a fancy name for it in psychological circles - projective identification. How powerful this is. It is so important not to allow myself to react to you, and not to allow myself to give up on you. But what else is there to do?

Indadequate parenting.

I know all the theory. You never had your attachment needs met when you were a child. No one mirrored your feelings, empathised with your emotions. No one smiled with you, cried with you, guessed at how you were feeling and what was wrong and put words to it for

you so that you could communicate and release those raw, wordless emotions. When you cannot do that, the feelings remain inexplicable and powerful, holding you in their grip. No one reassured you, held your hand when you were frightened, put the light on in the dark, read you stories about other children who felt like you, told you about their own feelings so that you realised that you were 'normal', just like other people. You never learned to empathise with others, because no one ever empathised with you. You grew up emotionally bewildered and illiterate. Emotions overwhelm you, frighten you and confuse you. But here and now, this is what is happening. I am feeling you, knowing you, experiencing you. Do you feel 'felt', known? I doubt it. The theory does not help me or you. You are so locked into your castle of hostility. I say to you, 'it's difficult for me not to touch you when you look so alone and isolated. I feel so sad that you cannot let me help you, that you keep me out. It makes me feel useless'. You shrug me off. The shrug is not quite so hostile this time.

How can you do other than block me out, when you had parents who were so locked into their own problems that they could not hear you, let alone be there for you emotionally. They had no words, precious releasing words to put to their pain and frustration. No words for themselves and certainly not for you and the other children. So you never learned how to deal with your feelings. You have

never learned how to share your pain with others who could hold you in that difficult space and make it bearable. You only learned how to protect yourself from feeling. Your mother betrayed you, tried to destroy you because she did not know how to deal with her own pain. She wanted to destroy herself and you because she could not take responsibility for her own life or yours. She could see no hope.

And why should I, and others who try to care for you, not be about to betray you also? What do you know of love, trust, compassion, empathy, unconditional support? Nothing at all. You cannot allow people to offer it to you, because you would rather bear the pain of never knowing it rather than have it, only for it to be snatched away as someone else leaves your life, changes their job, finishes their shift. You have known continuity of pain, but never continuity of love and commitment. And what can I offer you? A fleeting glimpse of loving care; a brief respite from your isolation - and then what? I can only be here for you for such a limited period of time. It is not enough.

Tackling the obstacle course of life.

I watch you kick a football, swing across a river on a rope, climb a long steep hill, run an obstacle course with grim determination. When you can see what you are up against and what you need to do to tackle it you are unstoppable - you triumph. But those inner obstacles are different. You

cannot see them, only feel. You do not know how to deal with them, or when they will arise in front of you. There seems no end to this inner obstacle course, no light at the end of the tunnel, no let up in the pain and no one to hand you the medal at the other end, only mindless, meaningless emptiness which you can fill with anger. It keeps you alive this resistance and hostility. It energises you. It gives you an enemy to fight.

We are not the enemy my lovely, but how would you know that, whose worst enemies were the people who brought you into the world, whose job it was to protect and inform you, not to confuse and harm you, put you at risk.

So who are you? You are everyone who has never had their attachment needs met, who has been betrayed by parents who did not believe their story, who stayed in relationships with people who abused them, who could not protect themselves let alone their offspring, who themselves did not have their attachment needs met and who are ignorant of the importance of doing so for others. You were not protected so you protected yourself, and now you have an armour plated defence against the world.

And how do I / we penetrate that armour? With love that knows no defeat, that does not shrink back from rejection, hostility and dumb resistance, that is not afraid of 'opening up cans of worms', but is willing to sit with you whilst they emerge,

dark, frightening, out of control. Someone who can face up to the possibility that you may harm yourself, even kill yourself - and that is risky. Dare I take that risk for you? I might be blamed, prosecuted. I can imagine dreadful possibilities arising from your potentially self destructive acts. I want to protect myself. I want to back off and leave you alone. Ah - alone - that's where I came in. You have the power to destroy yourself - and me. I am afraid of that, but I am more afraid of you wasting your precious life; of you feeling your gifts and talents shrivelling away in that dark place where you hide them in case they are invalidated or damaged. I am afraid of you spending years in emptiness and existential despair, never finding any meaning in your existence; living a joyless and soulless life.

To liberate you I must penetrate the armour with my love and my compassion. I must take off my own armour and expose my vulnerability. I must show you that I know who you really are. I must honour your courage and your spirit. I must be brave enough to suffer and to face the possibility of failing you and myself. I must risk my reputation and set you free to be who you must be. I must be willing to feel defeated, but never know defeat.

My message to you must be clear. Your suffering need not be in vain. Would I be here with you now had I not suffered as a child? I think not. Would I be of any use to you. I think not. I must help you to make meaning out of your suffering; to see that

you have experienced the deepest pits of pain and despair and survived. You are strong. Your spirit is still intact. It could all be for nothing. You may be determined not to hear; to make a mess of your life, but I must endure. You could learn that you have done nothing to be ashamed of, that you were sinned against, not sinning. You could begin to use your strength, your will, to work for you not against you. You could take responsibility for your life from now on. Do not continue to be a victim of your life's circumstances or you will make victors of those who have harmed you. Become a warrior for your own cause. Fight for your rights to be heard as well as for your right to remain silent. Acknowledge yourself for your courage and persistence. Know that there are people who want to hear your story and help you to lay it to rest. Build a future for yourself that is not based on reliving the drama of the past over and over again, but uses the past to strengthen you in your journey through the rest of your life. This requires me to validate your suffering, not marginalise it; tell you that it is 'all in the past', that you must 'cheer up'.

I recently tried to explain to an adult client why it was so important to honour his suffering as a child, rather than shrug it off as 'not that bad', or telling me, 'you just have to get on with it'. I pointed out to him that his marriage is on the rocks, he frequently feels isolated and unhappy and he does not know why. Until he can acknowledge his suffering (not wallow in it), he cannot make

meaning of it and put it to use in the development of his relationship with people. He will protect himself from the pain and so separate himself from others, not so obviously as the child referred to here, but just as effectively.

The end and the beginning.

It is the end of the programme and I am worried about you. I am handing you over to others who have the responsibility of caring for you. Will they 'care' about you as well as caring for you? Did we do enough? Did you hear in spite of yourself? I noticed you in that exercise. You would not do it and J (project manager) played your part. You pulled your chair away and put your head down, but I saw you looking and I know you took it in and took it away with you. Will you have the courage to trust your carers, or have we let you see the light at the end of a very long tunnel, only to leave you once more in the dark with no way out?

You are leaving. I hug all the other children and they respond, enthusiastically. You hide behind your carer. You make it very obvious. I say 'I'm coming to get you!!'. You run and you laugh and I run after you. You giggle and run further and you look at me. You are no longer hostile. Your look says, You found me, I am here.

This work is an act of faith and hope; faith in your capacity to endure and to prevail and hope for your life, my fierce and sensitive lovely. What a privilege it was to walk by your

side for a while and discover myself.

The day after finishing the programme this young person began to talk to her care workers. She revealed aspects of her life that she had refused to talk about previously. She asserted strongly that she was not going to let her mother continue to ruin her life. She turned up for an educational session, not only working hard, but being helpful to others who were finding the work difficult. This was a radical change which astonished and delighted the session leader. After one year this change had been sustained.

Part of the reason for her progress being sustained is because one of the RSW's who attended the course and who has the closest relationship with this young person also changed. His communication skills and self confidence improved substantially as a result of attending this programme and seeing the way I and our trained staff and volunteers worked with the young people. This also applied to a lesser degree to other RSW's.

As for me it was a valuable learning process; yet another opportunity to develop the 'observer' aspect of myself that can help me to produce a considered response to the behaviour of young people rather than being a victim of my own emotional process. This young person was a great teacher and I will always remember her and be grateful to her for that opportunity.