

What does black treacle have in common with riding a Harley-Davidson?

Jane Barclay

SYNOPSIS

In her personal account, Jane Barclay demonstrates how the process of self-integration is alive in every relationship – including, and perhaps especially, the one with her 1200cc Harley. The story is one of emergence from the patriarchal world of boarding school, of reclaiming, becoming and enjoying herself as an empowered woman.

Back from holiday, energised to write a piece for the Harley-Davidson Riders Club about my latest trip around France and talk about fear – a subject which doesn't belong to propping-up-the-bar-at-rallies banter, where all scary or risky moments are turned into entertaining stories – I wanted to expand my story for *Self & Society* to show how the healing process is active in every relationship.

With my husband riding his yellow Widegide and me on my peacock-blue Sportster, we've explored different parts of rural France each September for the last six years. Our most recent trip has been particularly special for me for forming a bridge between a prolonged period of waking in dread each morning, to reconnecting with the vital missing ingredient

– and for the chance to learn yet more about the journey of recovery at the same time as travelling.

On holiday, I ride more miles and more hours than in the whole of the rest of the year, and for consecutive days rather than at a weekend here and a weekend there – when each trip feels as though I'm climbing aboard for the first time, having not just to 'warm up' but talk myself down from dread to bearable anxiety, coaxing myself to trust that my body won't forget the basics. This sense of forgetting is the first clue that I'm dealing with trauma: more than a few days' gap and my knowing separates into cognitive 'common sense', that although offered kindly remains ineffective, and body-reaction of 'startle-freeze' that translates as 'I don't want to / can't'.

What else? In France, the country roads we choose in preference to autoroutes generally have smoother surfaces, less traffic and altogether better visibility than anywhere in southern England. Very different from riding either nose-to-tail along the coast or between high hedges through countryside. The safer I feel, the more I relax, de-cling ('let go') and grow in confidence: the more trusting I feel, the safer I ride. The further I can see ahead, the less I steer stiffly and ride as a separate entity which seeps out in front of the bike (picture a cartoon) to anticipate a brick wall around each looming corner, two fingers on the brake lever; when there's no car, or worse, another bike behind me, I stop trying to ride 'as if confident', which just increases pressure. I've wondered for a long time why I've preferred to ride last in a group, or behind my husband. This year, it came to me clearly: feeling chased and telling myself to speed up comes



from being ashamed. Afraid my fear will be seen, ashamed of feeling afraid. Another clue indicating trauma. (No wonder fellow-bikers don't want to have the 'sometimes I'm scared' conversation; in this ultra-macho environment, fear is taboo, and like all taboos is held fast by shame. Interesting that the other, very different culture I'm coming to two paragraphs down is, however, equally 'macho', and misogynistic.)

I've read many times about the compulsion to resolve trauma, and how seeking opportunities can lead, instead of resolution, to repetition that simply embeds the existing neural pathways even more deeply, rather than forming new ones. Each year, enduring a jaw-clenching, shoulder-scrunching ride in wet and especially in gusty conditions, I question why I persevere when all I long for is to be home now, wallowing in a hot bath with a fleecy blanket awaiting me to wrap up in. To be safe. But as soon as I do get there, I remember the moments of riding loose, of feeling alive, inhabiting my body and moving fluidly as one part of the bigger whole, in love with my Sporty, trusting its tyres to grip as promised, and my right hand not to grab the lethal front brake lever. Those times, or more specifically that 'biker part of me', is worth working for, for a while longer, before I limit the same endeavour to activities less likely to maim or kill (dancing, tennis – though being haunted by shame is equally present here, when making 'mistakes'). It's my 'extreme sport', inviting me to become my potential: literally potent, sensual, sexual – all of me. As fully alive as possible. No wonder within a few days of soaking up sun and vin rosé, of living from one sensual experience to the next, being in France worked its magic, and riding free came more easily, more of the time. So I'm determined to continue this journey back home to my body-'n-soul; exile is a bleak, desolate place.

This is where black treacle comes in. My relationship

with this sticky, oily, pungent substance began at my first breakfast at prep-school aged 9. This encounter, or more accurately what happened next, is the moment, on top of smothering protest and emotions in earlier years, I recognise as the final and severest cut which has shaped how I live and relate to myself and others ever since. I'll let my nine year-old tell the story; she may slip into school letter-writing style, but wants to tell it how it really was, not the 'jolly' version.

I'm standing in the corridor outside the dining-room. I can hear voices behind the closed door. I expect they'll all come out soon. The walls out here are made of dark wood because it's quite a grand house. I think the hall is up that end, and the classrooms are round the back in the stables. When I've been here a few days, I expect I'll know my way around.

I felt alright when I went into breakfast, liking wearing all my new uniform that Mummy and I went up to London to buy, and she sewed name-tapes into every teatime until we packed my trunk. I don't expect I'll use 24 handkerchiefs. I was put on the middle table with Mrs Ford (the headmistress) at one end and Matron (the frowning one) at the other because I am a new girl. We had our cornflakes, and then came bread with a small oblong of butter. But instead of jam I was given a dollop of black stuff that smelt bitter and spread like a puddle right across my plate. I picked up my knife; I was going to try, I really was. But my throat shut tight and then I felt my eyes watering. I dipped my head so no-one would see, but I couldn't stop tears coming down my face, and Mrs Ford saw. 'Jane, I think you had better leave the room', she said, quite loudly. So everyone looked. Which means everyone knows.

Last night, Michelle cried in our dormitory. (It's called Primrose.) She's only 5, and she was given a hug from another matron before lights out. The rest of us played catch with my Gonk. Crying if you're older than 5 means everyone staring. I hate black treacle, I want to go home. But no-one, here or even back there, must know this ever again.

Just as I remember the humiliating moment at home some years earlier, after which I locked away tears and protest, so I now recognise (after much furious resistance) that my refusal, as I stood alone in that oak-panelled corridor, to be sad, let alone afraid – albeit unconscious at the time and without doubt to serve survival – as self-betraying. (I suspect each former boarder has his or her own such defining moment, as well as all other victims of entrapment.) Deciding to hide homesickness to avoid being shamed in turn meant hiding from myself, also by means of shaming if feelings threatened to erupt ('don't be silly'); to survive, I

adopted the stance of the adults around me and of the larger system they represented and I was part of for the duration. The shock of realising no adult was going to comfort, let alone protect or rescue, that safety depended on me alone in a world that beneath the chumminess 'dog eats dog' (or little girl annihilates little girl) earned the trauma response of splitting off/freezing emotions sometimes described as 'soul murder'. I call it 'playing dead'.

Coming to accept that being sent away to school was traumatic and not the privilege it was, and continues to be promoted as, has been the route to forgiving myself for doing what I needed to, to survive; to distinguishing who I am from deeds I've done – and thence mending a severely ruptured relationship. Appreciating that every significant ending and goodbye is likely to at least stir, if not re-activate, what Nick Duffell names 'the Strategic Survival Personality' (see below) requires ongoing self-compassion and commitment to repeated recovery.

Before this year's holiday, the months of living partially alive followed a major ending. In February, I'd said goodbye for the last time to my therapist. Again. In 'Does Therapy Work?' (see below), I wrote about ending with my previous therapist, and pining for months afterwards. This time round, I automatically went into busy mode, doing what I knew from boarding school. To suppress any hint of distress, loss, or missing the woman I'd become very attached to, I filled every moment (Nick D calls this 'timetabling'), fuelled by a huge surge of what I now know to be compressed emotional energy. Until I collapsed, spent by the effort of splitting, left pining to feel alive again. One day, I 'got it': I was missing both feeling sad and letting myself protest against my own choice to leave her. There was no instant return from that disconnected state; I still woke each morning with a hollow stomach and craving to stay in bed for safety. But I started helping myself by purposefully evoking sadness at any opportunity (as a child, too, I chose films and music to make me cry), and also re-read Irvin Yalom on 'death terror' (see below) to provide support for feeling dread, lethargy and deadness. This emerging caring-adult/mother in me has come to realise that slicing off feelings, killing this part of me, is a bid to feel empowered, a hopeless fight against the truth that to be human includes being helpless in the face of stronger forces, death included.

As the weeks passed, I thought more and more of my therapist, and decided to continue the process of bringing myself back to life by doing something that had been

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disallowed when I was a child away at school. I was going to telephone, and differently from the contact I subsequently made with my first therapist three months after we'd said goodbye (see 'Does Therapy Work?'), arrange a further therapy appointment to see her, to go say 'I've missed you'. Which I've done. And cried, a lot.

Since then, my life-energy has been pouring back in like the tide returning. Paralysis now 'mobilised', my challenge is to ride that energy like I hope to ride my bike. If I don't, I'm in danger of being swept away, and repeating the cycle that earns the name 'bi-polar'. At one end, dread and simulated deadness; at the other, feeling chased to compensate by living double-time. Neither achieves its underlying purpose of control, of winning, defeating that which can never be conquered.

Mostly, when I take the bike out now, all I coach myself to do is breathe. Too many instructions ('shoulders down', 'watch for the apex...') and pressure to get it right puts me back into panic/survival mode, where challenges become obstacles that mesmerise – what Babette Rothschild calls the trauma vortex (see below). This is when tennis, singing and dancing are great for practising breathing, using core muscles, scanning where I'm going / wanting to place the ball / the next line of music, rather than fixing to any one spot.

In my H-D piece, after a paragraph on riding scared, I wrote, 'Enough of the heavy stuff'. It felt abrupt, also a bit apologetic for talking 'soft'. But the need to belong to my

pack also called, and it was the best I came up with before continuing with some description about the routes we took and the people we met.

Interestingly, I'm noticing the urge here to just stop. I've said all I can think of. But that would be the way of the school letter. In the spirit of maintaining connection to feelings, I'd like to share a gift that came in the form of email a day before setting off for the ferry to Cherbourg:


Dear Jane, I just wanted to thank you for writing your book. I am currently sat on a crowded train to continue my first steps to become a psychotherapist. Reading your poem 'The role of the counsellor' has reduced me to tears, a look not normally associated with a 58 year-old man at 8.45 a.m.

This is what he'd read:

It's ok to be angry, it's ok to be sad,
It's ok to be frightened, I don't need to pretend,
It's ok to be silent, to sit here and cry,
You stay with me quietly and don't ask me why.

Layer by layer you help me dig down
Freeing truths half-forgotten, not admitted, not known,
No shock, disapproval, no scorn, no shame,
You accept who I am, my guilt and my shame.

No tidy solutions, advice, sorting out,
The choices are mine, I'm free to decide,
To stay bitter and hurt, stayed ruled by my past,
Or break free, and enjoy being me at last.

I wrote this to present at the end of my first year's counselling training in 1996. I gave it to my first and much-loved therapist a few years later, which he then recorded and gave a copy to me at a time I needed his voice to cling on to between sessions. He died last year (I wrote a piece about Steve King for S&S). I'm glad I still have his voice on tape. I'm glad I'm more able than last year, and the years before that, to remember him with feeling rather than cut off. I'm glad I can be part of spreading some ripples out into the wider world. 



Jane Barclay has a private practice as Therapeutic Counsellor in central Exeter. As well as working with individuals, she is dedicated to raising awareness of the Boarding School Experience amongst colleagues (see

www.jbcounselling.co.uk for details of forthcoming workshops), and is also one of the directors of Boarding Concern (www.boardingconcern.co.uk). Following the publication of *Does Therapy Work?* (Troutbeck Press, 2011), she is currently working on a sequel, *Living with Dying*, continuing to draw on her own self-exploration and discoveries. She welcomes contact by email: janebarclay@mfdl.org.uk

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