

# ‘Teaching? Me? Never.’ The Process of Becoming Continues...

Jane Barclay

## SYNOPSIS

In this article Jane draws on her personal process to track the experience of expanding her practice into facilitating workshops.

The 16<sup>th</sup> of February this year was a first for me. The idea of running a full day’s workshop for therapists, on a subject I’ve grown passionate about (the experience of Boarding School), came to me whilst on holiday last September. Once home, I started putting the word about locally, and as soon as I set a date and actively marketed the programme, my idea became reality: enquiries came in, and then bookings. I sent out receipts and designed attendance certificates and posters. So far, all energising and exciting – and still far enough ahead that I could get on with the details of content and structure without either freezing in panic by pressure of ‘deadline’ or complacently putting off getting started.

Day by day, I worked and reworked the programme. I hunted out my dusty notes on group process and re-read the accompanying text. Then a voice started to whisper, ‘What have I done, what am I letting myself in for?’

The defining moment came in early January when all the workshop places were filled. It was then that I recognised my own boarding-school ‘Strategic Survival Personality’, and the particular trait that reactivates

whenever I extend myself, to ‘go it alone’. Need help? No, thank you very much!

First step, recognition. Next, the pertinent questions: – ‘How come?’, ‘What does this serve?’, ‘What’s at risk?’, and ‘What’s the cost?’ – all of which brought forth extreme tension in the form of resistance to letting myself know what I needed (plenty of supervision). This appeared in the by now very familiar guise of projection: ‘They won’t like me doing this, will stop me somehow, imply I’m getting above myself, want to keep it for themselves’. The answers, then, to the first question were ‘to retain control, to avoid exposure and inevitable humiliation’. The risk? Feeling under-resourced on the day and – exposed.

The urge to do or get what I wanted in secret – even more familiar – was powerful. No wonder: I had learned that survival depended on keeping secret from myself my truths of feeling lost, alone, scared; and of needing help and contact. The investment by my ‘Survival Persona’ in maintaining this split (in effect abandoning myself all over again) to avoid being found out was on an existential scale.

But I wasn’t starting out. If I was going to take the next step of teaching others my understanding of what the healing process entailed, role-modelling what this internal fight meant and where it could lead was vital. I needed to authentically ‘practise what I preach’. There was the ethical matter, too, of considering the participants’ safety and well-being.

‘I can’t afford it’, argued my Survival Personality, making one last stand. Able to recognise this for what it was, listening to the terror that lay beneath: of being ditched, abandoned, unappreciated, I took charge and booked a generous amount of supervision. I anticipated more rebellion, but what came was relief, after which it was easy to ask a trusted colleague for help on the day.

And so I reached an experience new to me, of feeling excited-nervous rather than heart-thudding terrified, and able to remain present-and-joined-up throughout the day, rather than resort to getting through, pretending – feeling fraudulent is an experience I know well, and often hear about from clients.

I'd already considered an optional follow-up day. By the time we came to closing and saying goodbye, I felt confident to offer the date I'd had in mind, two months ahead. Facilitating, I'd discovered, was not about being right, about telling, about 'winning' against the class out to get me; it was to weave the content I wanted to share into a process of respecting and valuing each participant (which I'd experienced all along as an adult in training, and read much about from Irvin Yalom), and about inviting interaction.

What a difference from the dictatorial and, at times, sadistic models of my pre-prep, prep and public schools – no wonder I'd spent decades avoiding any form of 'teacher' or 'leader' role.

Day two, in April, was equally enlightening. Now that I could seek and receive help more easily, I didn't experience the same jolt turning idea to reality. I was pleased to realise what the same group returning for a second time (term) meant in terms of parallel process, and was able to meet each criticism-laden greeting – 'poor directions', 'bell didn't work,' 'so many stairs' – with recognition and welcoming of the feelings that lay beneath, rather than turn defensive. Here was in-the-moment material to illustrate my theoretical model of how the Survival Personality will attack, in defence of itself, at any hint of threat to its existence, and how to respond effectively.

So this time it was afterwards that my Survival Strategy of 'managing without' emerged. Despite years of taking individual client work to supervision, it hadn't crossed my mind to put in place a session specifically to 'de-brief' in the week immediately after group work. Realising I'd neglected this need came indirectly, via an incident at home two days later. Asking for help with a computer function, I collapsed into familiar apologetic helplessness which, as usual, evoked the exact reaction from my 'teacher' I lived in dread of: impatience – which I immediately translated into 'I'm stupid', retreating further behind my wall of protective shame. After a night of tossing between blame (Fight) and wanting to leave (Flight), I surfaced exhausted, but knowing that my indecision (Freeze) indicated a need for something, even if I didn't yet know what.

How to find out? Get help. From whom? Therapist? Unavailable. Supervisor? Ah, yes! Two texts later and we'd arranged a phone call, before which I knew what I needed this for: to access my own distress that had been aroused but unacknowledged the previous Saturday, and again later from writing the words higher up this page, 'What a difference from the dictatorial and at times sadistic models of my pre-prep, prep and public schools'. Shutting down had been automatic. What I had always needed, if I was to discharge frozen emotional energy, was holding and validation by someone who wasn't shut down, someone who cared. For a few moments, I was able to feel sad to be living thus, missing myself.

I'm pleased to be running these workshops again in the autumn (this time at the Iron Mill Institute); and I'm glad to have some months in between to appreciate the potential for learning, to process feedback from my participants and myself, and to continue putting into practice the sequence of enquiry, listening for and reconnecting with feelings split off in the name of survival, that I want to pass on to fellow therapists. **S**



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**For details of forthcoming workshops on 12 October and 16 November, visit [www.ironmill.co.uk](http://www.ironmill.co.uk) and [www.jbcounselling.co.uk](http://www.jbcounselling.co.uk)**

### Further Reading

- Benson, J.F. (1987) *Working More Creatively with Groups*, London: Routledge
- Duffell, N. (2000) *The Making of Them*, Bridport, Dorset: Lone Arrow Press
- Hermann, J. (1992) *Trauma and Recovery*, New York: HarperCollins
- Levine, P. (1997) *Waking the Tiger*, Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books
- Rothschild, B. (2002) *Help for the Helper*, New York: Norton Press
- Yalom, I. (2002) *The Gift of Therapy*, London: Piatkous